

THE RYUO'S WORK IS 3

NEVER DONE!

STORY ■
SHIROW
SHIRATORI

ART ■
SHIRABII

SUPERVISION
■ SAIYUKI



VISIT...

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I BITE
MY LIP IN
ANGUISH,
THOUGHTS
OF THE
PARADISE
ON THE
OTHER SIDE
OF THE
BARRIER
RUNNING
THROUGH
MY HEAD.

"THANKS,
AI♪"

"OH,
WOW
YOU'VE
GOT
PERFECT
PROPOR-
TIONS,
KEIKA!"

"..... FOUND IT."





MEET THE CHARACTERS



YAICHI KUZURYU:
Ryuo. Knowing that he is the face of the Shogi world drives him to use facial products after bathing.



AI HINATSURU:
Yaichi's first apprentice. Pinches pennies to the point that she always buys shampoo refills.



KEIKA KIYOTAKI:
Daughter of Yaichi's Master. Is very particular about Shogi styles, but is rather adventurous when trying new bath salts.



SORA GINKO:
Yaichi's elder sister apprentice. Secretly enjoys collecting pennants from the hot spring hotels where her title matches took place.



AI YASHAJIN:
Yaichi's second apprentice. An upper-class lady from Kobe. Prefers bars of soap to liquid.



AYUMU KANNABE:
Pro player from Kanto and Yaichi's rival. For some reason he is often invited to join religious groups.



CHARLETTE ISOIR:
Ai Hinatsuru's 6-year-old Shogi friend from France. Calls all bath salts and elixirs bubbles.

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THE RYUO'S WORK IS NEVER DONE

VOLUME 3

SHIROW SHIRATORI

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Shirabii

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▲ PROLOGUE

“To Twenty-Year-Old Me”

Now that I’ve turned ten, I’m writing to myself ten years in the future.

What is twenty-year-old me like?

Am I married? Do I have kids already?

Does Master still play Shogi with the same energy he does now? Are we still living together?

Did I join the Women’s League?

Have I won a title, maybe?!

Ten-year-old me is having a hard time studying Shogi and it’s getting a little overwhelming.

Master is very strict and is always angry at me.

I don’t like being yelled at and it really hurts when I lose, so I always cry when it happens.

At times like that, I think about quitting Shogi altogether.

But I love Shogi.

I love a lot of things, but I love Shogi the most.

Now that I'm studying Shogi, I get to spend more time with Master. That makes me so happy.

That's why I want to join the Women's League.

My dream is to become a Women's League player and work side-by-side with Master.

So ... twenty-year-old me ...

Did my dream come true?

RECORD 1

PLAYER INTRODUCTION

Jin Natagiri 8-*dan*

PLAYER NUMBER: 238

BIRTHDATE: July 17th

HOMETOWN: Yamagata Prefecture

MASTER: Hisashi Onikoube 9-*dan*

RYUO MATCH: Group 1 (2 seasons)

PLACEMENT MATCH: A League (1 season)

TITLE HISTORY:

TOTAL TITLE MATCH APPEARANCES:	1
TOTAL TITLES:	0 seasons



🏠 NEMESIS

This happened about one year and eight months ago.

“..... I lost.”

My first league match——after turning pro——ended in failure.

October. My last year in junior high.

Having advanced out of the Sub League to become only the fourth junior high school student professional Shogi player in history, I came to the Tokyo Shogi association in Sendagaya to make my pro debut.

“The first junior high pro in twenty-five years has arrived!”

The match was supposed to have taken place in Kansai against another person registered with that association. But since everyone was expecting the media to swarm in for the scoop, my match was moved to Tokyo instead.

Dressed in my school uniform and collar firmly clipped in place, I was enveloped in a flood of flashing lights once I entered the arena.

My opponent was in B League, 1st group, 7-dan.

A guy in his thirties. A veteran player with refined skills to match.

Normally someone in C-2 who just became a pro would be no match But then again, I was the first junior high pro in twenty-five years.

Everyone in the room was like *“Maybe he can pull it off?”*

And even I was thinking, “Maybe I can? And isn’t going up against a B League opponent a bit boring? I came all the way to Tokyo ... why not put me up against someone in A?” Honestly, I was overconfident.

The match itself was a hard-fought battle right out of the gate.

However, I caught a break in the late game when my opponent messed up.

If I had just kept a cool head, I would've won. But with all the journalists around and the hype that went into my debut match going to my head, I made an even worse mistake. Not only did my chance to put him in checkmate slip through my fingers, but he finished me with his next move. Out of all the ways to lose, this hurts the worst.

Yes, instant death.

"Kuzuryu 4-*dan*. What are your thoughts on the match?!"

"Was the professional wall just too hard to break in today's loss?!"

"....."

It hurt too much to say anything, and my opponent's next words drove me even closer to the edge.

"What, what? You mean you didn't see that checkmate? It was a rather simple sequence if you ask me."

"....."

"Looks like prodigies can fall flat on their faces much harder than normal folks can ever dream of! Wheew, that was a prodigy overlooking a checkmate? Genius! Looks like Kansai prodigies are of a different feather! I didn't think a face plant like that was even possible."

[illegible]



“HHHHHHH-
HHHHHHHH-
HHHHHHHH-
HHHHHHHH-
HHHHHHHH-
HHHHHHHH-
HHHHHHHH-
HHHHHH!!”



I raced out of the Shogi association and passed Hatomori Shrine right next door at a breakneck speed, only stopping at the large Shibuya scramble intersection to wait for the light to change. The instant it did, I turned all of that built-up pain into energy, yelling from the bottom of my lungs and running forward as fast as my legs could carry me.

I thought about catching a train at Sendagaya Station, but the pain was so severe that I ran right by it and even the next one, Yoyogi Station, before I knew it and ended up running along the Odakyu-Odawara Line from Minami-Shinjuku all the way down.

"UWAAA!!!"

I cried!

Tears and snot flying off my face. I cried and cried!

I ran!!

School backpack still strapped to my shoulders, my leather shoes pounded the asphalt as I ran like I'd never run before!!

"UWAAAAHHH

It hurt so much!

It was so pitiful!

It was so embarrassing!

It wasn't the loss that hurt. Going in so cocky was embarrassing. My weakness was pitiful. It was the only pro debut match I'll ever have in my life and I didn't play my best. That's what hurt.

"UWAA

It was dark before I came back to myself.

What's more, a pitch-black ocean spread out in front my eyes.

I was dead set on jumping in and swimming all the way back to Osaka Port, but a guy who worked at a nearby surfing shop mistook me for being suicidal and stopped me.

I ended up running nonstop for eight hours after that match, going all the way from Sendagaya, Tokyo to Chigasaki in Kanagawa Prefecture. That's 61.4 kilometers (I checked on Google Earth once I got home). My uniform was soaked with sweat and my leather shoes were in bad shape.

Chigasaki has warm water, so surfers hit the waves in winter quite a bit too. After I got there, I worked for the guy who saved me at the surfing shop, living there for a week. That's when Big Sis came looking for me, but my spirit was still in pieces. I bartered.

"I'm done with Shogi! I'll work here and become a surfer!!"

"Your head—on a pike."

That was the end of it. I got dragged back to Osaka.

That's how the curtain fell on the story of my pitifully painful pro debut loss, as well as my first time running away from home—.

Afterward, all that pain and suffering became a springboard that launched me to victory in the Ryuo Title Match. And thus the youngest title holder in history—Yaichi Kuzuryu—came to be.

Now.

The reason I'm bringing up the past is—

"Hm, hm, hehe♪ What fun. Playing against you, Yaichi, is just so much fun
♪"

Because right now I'm sitting across the board from that very opponent.

Jin Natagiri 8-*dan*. Ranked fourth in A League.

He was in B-1 when I made my pro debut, but he rose all the way to A, 8-*dan*

by throttling everyone he went up against in last year's placement matches and now stands among the best of the best.

Being one of the Shogi world's few truly devoted researchers, he fully comprehends a wide range of the latest strategies and sequences. He can play Static Rook, Ranging Rook, take the first move for the second, defend and attack A true *All-Rounder*.

He's got a nickname too—*Switch Hitter*.

"Sigh~ I've got butterflies! Will my narrow advance make it all the way through your defenses? Oh, the butterflies! Heheee!!"

Is this some kind of off-the-board strategy?

Mr. Natagiri's bizarre ramblings are really throwing me off my game—it doesn't help that he's completely controlling the pace of our match. I hate to admit it, but it's true.

Not only is he particularly good during the early game, he went first and drew me in with one of the latest strategies, resulting in a commanding lead early on.

We're already in the late game, and he hasn't let me go on attack even once. Seriously, he's still advancing on to my side of the board while cutting off all my counterattacks before they happen. The Ryuo is down for the count.

"..... Ughhh"

I hold my head in my hands, groaning at my pitiful performance. All these bad memories are coming back.

The thing is, I didn't just lose to him on my pro debut. I also lost to him in my first match after claiming the Ryuo title, the first of eleven straight losses. I still remember the article in the newspaper: *Ryuo Beaten to a Pulp*.

More painful memories come flooding in, squeezing my spirit almost to the breaking point But!

"..... Nn!!"

I'm going to hold out as long as I can and save every possible second of waiting time!

At this point, my only chance is to hope that my opponent messes up. It's time to put the stubborn, muddy playing style Kansai players are known for to good use. If I can maintain even just a one-minute edge of waiting time once the final battle begins, I'll have a chance to turn the tide!

Whether Mr. Natagiri knew what I was trying to do or not, he started leaning forward to get a better look at the board whenever his turn came around and would then speed up.

Now both of us are hovering over the board, leaning in.

I glance up for a moment and see Mr. Natagiri looking right at me.

Then, he whispers, "You know something? Matches are a lot like romance"

..... What the heck is this guy talking about right in the middle of a league match?

"Don't you see? We spend the whole day so close to each other. Why ... it's almost like a date."

"You have a point."

Mr. Natagiri is way up in the Shogi world hierarchy, so a bottom feeder like me has no choice but to acknowledge him.

He continues, "I've been thinking about you all night long ..."

Say what

"Actually, no. Since long before then. Since the moment that this match was determined, every single day ... Every hour, every minute, I've been thinking about you ... Learning all about you"

Learn ing

“What strategy might you use today? What sequence would you prepare just for me? What clothes will you wear? Whose fan will you use? Will we get to eat lunch together? While I think about you, are you thinking about me the same way?”

“???”

Is he trying to provoke me by saying this weird stuff?

It’s the late game, so is this his way of making me lose focus? To make me mess up?

“Then there’s the match itself. The way you take off your glasses when you’re deep in thought, and I get to look deep into your real eyes. Don’t you just get butterflies? Or do you not get them the way I do? Oh, I was just so nervous.”

Crap, crap, crap, crapcrapCRAP!!

Huh?! Hold up, hold up?!

His nickname: Switch Hitter Is that what it means?!

I’m one bad jolt away from a panic attack, and he starts whispering to me through hot breaths.

“Yaichi”

“Y-Yes?”

“Do you have ... someone special?”

Switch Hitter asks something completely unrelated to Shogi but keeps up the feverish pace on the board. *Haa Haa It’s like he’s gasping for breath over there. I look away out of reflex.*

“Ah! That means you do have someone?! Could it be a girl? Or, just maybe——.”

“!!!!”

I look over at the recorder in a desperate plea for help, but the Sub League member (♂) sitting there keeps his eyes firmly glued to the match record. Have a heart!

“.....!!”

I look back down at the board and put my hand on my cheek, acting like I’m thinking about something very hard when really I’m just making sure our eyes don’t meet.

I’m in no shape to think about Shogi right now, but I’m a pro player. Not only that, I hold one of only seven Ryo titles. So, I put every ounce of concentration I have left to get the most out of every second and to focus on finding a way to come out victorious in the end. It’s time for muddy stubbornness to turn the tide!! Just when I’d finally flipped the switch I gotta take a leak

An urge to race to the nearest restroom hit me like a tidal wave. I’ve still got a little bit of waiting time left, so I start to get to my feet to take care of business when——

“Oh? Potty break? Want some company?”

Why are you trying to come with me?!

“.....!!”

My waist hovering over my ankles, I put both hands down on the *tatami* mat and endure the growing *pressure* in a Crouching Style Shogi stance.

Mr. Natagiri mumbles, “Ah, so you’re not going,” and looks back down at the board. “Why don’t you go!!?”

There’s a restroom right outside each of the arenas in the Black Corridor, the fifth floor of the Kansai Shogi Association.

However, such a short distance has never felt so far away ...!

At this point, the only way I’m going to get to go to the john is to finish this match. It’s too dangerous to go in there with the Switch Hitter. I cannot let that

happen. Which means, I have no choice but to end this.

“..... I will win!”

Enough stalling. I’ve bet everything on a wing and a prayer.

I went in for the counteroffensive, which seemed to surprise Mr. Natagiri as well, but he charged out to greet me head-on. We trade blows back and forth using no time at all. There wasn’t even time to put the pieces firmly into place, each move making a loud *snap!* The pieces are barely inside the lines.

“..... Intense!”

An overexaggeration leaks from the recorder’s mouth. *I’m* the one trying not to leak!

Then——

“Ah I lost!”

At the very end, when my last offensive had been completely cut off and I read that I’d come up one move short, I threw in the towel once my opponent moved in.

“..... So, Yaichi.”

Paying no attention to my current situation, the victorious Mr. Natagiri calls me by my first name and suggests out of the blue, “My hotel isn’t too far from here ... Why don’t we go there and have our own private review session——?”

“Sorry, no can do, goodbye!!” I yell, jump to my feet, and hold it in as I bolt out of the association.

Three minutes later.

“..... Ahhh~~~. That’s better”

I made it all the way back to my apartment without any leaks and, finally, relief.

If I hadn’t been able to hold it during the match, the Internet chat rooms

would've roasted me alive. Thanks to a certain Master of mine peeing out of the association window, I'm already stuck with that image

"Whew I'm so glad I live this close to the association. And the second floor too. Suppose I owe Big Sis a *thank you* for that"

She invited herself along when I started looking at apartments and simply said, "Here." Never mind that the room is in my name, she ignores everything I say and treats it like her own place.

She lets herself in to play Shogi whenever she wants, uses the kitchen whenever she wants, leaves her own shampoo and toothbrush here all the time, borrows my shirts and wears them around, etc., etc. It's hard to tell who's the real master of the house.

"The younger brother's apprentice's stuff belongs to his big sister too." That's her policy. Who is she: the queen?!

Then again, she doesn't drop by anywhere near as much now that I have a live-in apprentice.

But, anyway——.

"I hope I wasn't rude. He's one of the top players, after all. But, wait, the way he was acting during the match really didn't seem like an *act*, so maybe he really is that way"

Even now I've got chills. Shaking from head to toe

"If I remember right I'm scheduled to play him again in three weeks?"

Honestly, I don't think I can win. Today marks my third loss in a row.

"I know it's not good to dread going up against one person in particular ... But it feels like focusing on him would be much worse ... But seriously, which side is he, really? Ayumu might know something ... Wait, he doesn't strike me as the kind of guy who would be interested in gossip, so maybe Ryou Tsukiyomizaka would be better——."

Thinking things through, I walk into the *tatami* room and see ...

... my apprentice sprawled out on the floor.

“..... Ai?”

Her face flat on the mat and backpack still strapped to her shoulders, my apprentice doesn't respond to my voice whatsoever.

“Ai! What's wrong?! Ai!!”

I rush to her side and prop her up against my knee. It looks like her tiny chest is rising and falling. Thank goodness, she's alive!

But she looks very weak.

Why in the world?!

After calling out to her over and over again, Ai's eyes open ever so slightly and she reaches a trembling hand toward my face.

“M Master” Then, putting the last bit of her strength into forcing words out of her mouth, she says, “..... B”

“B?!”

“..... Big bath”

..... Bath?

▲ BIG BATH

“Nyahhhhh~::~ ≡”

My apprentice’s melty voice echoes through the spacious bathing hall.

This public bathhouse just opened, so we have the place to ourselves. Heck, I’m the only one on the men’s side. It must be the same on the women’s side too because I recognize all of the voices.

“Ai, what do you think? Feeling any better?”

“Nyahhh!”

Relief passes through me as soon as I hear my apprentice’s energetically happy response come over the barrier wall.

I was worried when I found her collapsed on the floor, but I’m glad it was nothing serious.

“Let’s see, you came to Osaka two months ago Ai, you must’ve been really holding back. Everyone should relax and stretch their legs in a big tub every once in a while Especially you, growing up with a hot spring as part of the family business.”

This is an old bathhouse that’s just around the corner from Master Kiyotaki’s place.

Big Sis and I used to come here all the time with Master and Keika; my Shogi family has a lot of great memories here.

“But I never thought you were restraining yourself from going to a place like this the whole time”

Keika’s voice comes from over the wall. “You should’ve spoken up sooner. I feared the worst when Yaichi told me you were passed out on the floor.”

“S-Sorry”

A rather sharp voice cut in as if to drown out Ai's apology: Big Sis. "This is too good for someone in training. A sponge and a sink is good enough for some grade school girl living with her Master."

"That's news to me. I seem to remember a young Ginko pleading to come to the bathhouse all the time."

"....."

"You also cried whenever there wasn't any ice cream after we were done, didn't you?"

"..... Keika, please leave it at that ..."

"Phh-ha-ha! You talk all grown up, but you're really still just a kid, aren't you?"

"Humph! *You* are the kid. Just a flat and smooth grade schooler."

Oh boy, here come the fireworks.

Ai and Big Sis fight all the time. So much so, that recently it feels like something's missing when they're not at each other's throats.

Go ahead, knock yourselves out—— But then.

"But Aun- Sora-sensei, you're smooth too!!"

"Pfff?!"

My foot slipped, and I had to catch myself.

You're smooth too, smooth too, too ... The echoes came flying off the particularly acoustic bathhouse walls, emphasizing every single word.

B-Big Sis

Still doesn't have any?

“Hey, Yaichi! Wipe that image out of your head, now?! You pervert!! Ero-Ryuo!!”

“Sto-! Ouch! B-Big Sis! Please, stop throwing things into the men’s bath!!”

“Shut up, shut up, shut up!! Fall, hit your head on the tile, and forget everything!!”

Buckets and plastic chairs come flying over the barrier wall like she’s got a rapid-fire catapult over there. Is she trying to kill me?!

“G-Ginko, calm down! Actually, that’s a plus considering Yaichi’s tastes of Loli ...?!”

“I don’t want that plus?!”

Whatever Keika is doing over there, it must’ve worked because Big Sis’s blitzkrieg came to a sudden halt. Whew

I pick up all the buckets and bars of soap and start thinking over everything again No, not the “smooth” thing. Shogi. Seriously, okay?

The match I lost to Mr. Natagiri, the reason was——.

“..... Research. That has to be it.”

He knew everything there was to know about me.

It’s a given that he’d know my best strategies, but he also knew when I like to switch between defense and offense and how I use my waiting time. With him knowing all of my habits, I was a sitting duck out there ... Is it me, or did it get cold in here? A chill in a bathhouse?

Mr. Natagiri found my weakest points and hit them.

“I can’t win like this I have to find a way, something that will get me past his research”

I have an idea. I’ve been looking into it for a while.

But, it’s not something that I can just do willy-nilly. It’s a hard choice.

At the same time, doing it requires a certain *sense*. I can't get that sense by researching on my own.

I have to practice against an opponent who already has it in order to steal it before I can use it as my own.

"In that case ... I guess I have no choice but to ask *him* ..."

Ask the man who has the deepest knowledge and feel for that style. Go to the player who has the exact sense that I want.

Learning from him directly would be the best option But there are issues.

How should I ask him? He doesn't take apprentices, or participate in practice groups, or even do versus matches. He's built his reputation on it Hmmmm
.....

I stretch out in the tub, pondering my next move when I hear more voices coming from next door. The girls sure sound like they're having a good time.

"Oh, wow You've got perfect proportions, Keika!"

"Thanks, Ai♪ So will you once you get a little older."

"I will?!"

"Of course not. Keika, don't get her hopes up. It'll go to her head."

"Smooth"

"Want your head on a pike?"

..... Only people at about the same ability level get into fights.

"Now, now, you two. That's enough arguing. Let's rinse each other like friends, okay?"

Ah——.

Rinse Each other?!

"Keika! Sit right there and I'll rinse your back!"

“Why, thank you, Ai. ... Owwh? That’s nice. You’re really good at this

“E-he-he ≡ I always helped out at my family’s hot spring, and I got really good at rinsing customers’ backs!”

R-Rinsing with Keika

Even I’ve only done that once, and that was right after I joined this Shogi family, when I was six ... Damn, I’m jealous!

“No, you’re really good Mm! Ahhn?! There too?!”

“I’ll make sure everywhere is nice and squeaky clean!”

“A-Ai? That’s enough you don’t have to do any- Mmnnn!? Ah! Ahnn≡ Haa Haa ≡ Ahhh Ai, you’re amazing ≡”

“K-Keika?! Are you all right?!”

“Sora-sensei, now it’s your turn.”

“Huh? Wait, what are you——.”

“I’ll make you smooth and shiny.”

“N-No Sto-! Kh! D-Doesn’t feel good at all!!”

Damn it!! Why am I over here on the men’s side?!

Why——why did I have to be born a man?!

I bite my lip in anguish, thoughts of the paradise on the other side of the barrier running through my head ... To be blunt, this hurts worse than losing that Shogi match!!

So, I sprawled out completely.

“Ughh So dizzy I think I’m gonna be sick

“Here Yaichi. Drink some cold water and put your legs up over here. I’ll cool them off with a damp towel.”

“..... I love you, Keikaaa

“Sure, sure.”

Keika sets to work on my legs without a second thought and tossed my sincere confession of love to the side just as quickly.

I’m back in the lobby, laying on the *tatami* mats with an electric fan pointed right at me.

Ai and Big Sis are a little distance away, playing Shogi on a fold-up Shogi board that’s seen better days. Maybe it’s because they were arguing in the bath, but each of them is snapping down their pieces with extra oomph.

The old-style bathhouses usually have Shogi boards on hand and I’m used to seeing people enjoying a match after a dip ... The matches aren’t particularly good, but still.

“That’s Lil’ Ginko for ya!”

“And the wee lady ain’t so bad herself.”

“Oh really? She’s Yaichi’s apprentice, you say?”

“The little tyke’s grown up and taken his own apprentice ...”

Growing up in this area, Big Sis and I are treated like the neighborhood kids.

They cheer us on when we play Shogi, but they don’t know the meaning of the word *restraint*. We could be in the middle of a game and they’ll start pointing things out or giving suggestions, very distracting. Then again, that’s part of the fun.

A group of customers have gathered around Ai and Big Sis to watch their match. Keika watches them with a hint of nostalgia in her eyes and says, “Well, this is unusual. You hardly ever get light-headed from a bath, Yaichi. Was today’s match on your mind?”

“..... Yeah. Pretty much”

What was I supposed to say? *I was thinking about what was going on in the*

girl's bath? Smooth ...

"I know that feeling. Sometimes I stay inside a sauna until I'm light-headed after losing a match."

"Ahh The urge to inflict as much pain on yourself as possible, yep. Can't sleep at all either"

"And it's so awkward at home."

All true. Of course, losing a match hurts, but the hardest thing to do is to figure out how to talk with people after a loss.

That's especially true for people you live with and close friends. Sure, they're careful not to say the wrong thing, but everyone keeps their distance.

"In my case, my father is also my Master, and the two of us live together, yes? There's no way for me avoid him ... The only time that living alone sounds good to me is right after losing."

"What's Master like when that happens?"

"He doesn't bring up the Practice League at all. But I can tell he knows what happened because he goes a little too far trying to act normal. He's a professional as well, so I know he can't help but say a few things."

Exactly. At the end of the day, we have to get over our losses on our own.

That's why we want to be alone when we lose. Painfully so.

Which is exactly why I moved out of Master's house when I turned pro. I was certain I wouldn't be able to survive the pro Shogi world if I didn't have a change of scenery.

After losing to Mr. Natagiri in the worst way possible in my pro debut, I started looking at apartments the day I came back to Osaka and moved out as soon as I graduated from junior high.

Living with Master, Keika, and Big Sis it was just too warm in so many

ways.

“..... We used to come here all the time,” said Keika, her voice warm and content after a nice bath.

Osaka is full of bathhouses. At least, I think it is.

Lots of families come to these places to relax and coming here was something that Big Sis and I always looked forward to the most.

..... But, the first time we came here, I got to go into the women’s side because it was *too dangerous for me to be by myself*! I was only six years old at the time. Keika was a full-fledged high school girl, and she washed me from head to toe!!

Which of course means that I’ve seen her naked As a result, I have a very real idea of what’s under her clothes even when she’s fully dressed——.

“Do you remember the first time?”

Zing☆

“N no? Can’t say that I do.”

“Ah, yeah. It was more than ten years ago, so I guess you wouldn’t ...”

Keika smiles, a hint of sadness in her eyes.

“You and Ginko were too scared to go in by yourselves. So, Yaichi, you came in with us. Ginko clung to me like a cute little koala the whole time. She was so adorable.”

“R-Really? I guess I was too young, don’t remember a thing. Too bad.”

“Both of you have grown up so much ... Meanwhile, I’m turning into an old lady.”

“What are you saying?! Keika, you’re only twenty-five!”

“Almost twenty-six.”

The strength and speed of her instantaneous response caught me off guard. I couldn't say anything.

"In no time at all. I'll be twenty-six"

Twenty-six years old. That's—a very important age for people in the Shogi world.

Forgetting I had just gotten out of the tub, I sat right up and said, "Hey, Keika! Why don't we all go out for steak tonight?! Everyone: the whole family?! My treat?!"

"Sorry. I have plans."

"Plans? Going to go out after taking a bath? Ah! It's not a d-d-date, right?!"

"It's not. Unfortunately."

Forcing a smile, Keika gently wipes away a few beads of sweat from around her neck with a towel.

"It's a reunion. A high school reunion for the all-girls school I went to."

NIGHT STREETS

Big Sis had to go all the way to Osaka Station, so Ai and I said goodbye to her and got off at Fukushima Station. Then, the two of us started walking through the neon lights of the shopping district on our way to our apartment.

“Nights aren’t that cold anymore.”

“Nope.”

“The bars around here aren’t as empty as they used to be.”

“Nope.”

“..... Keika never gives me a chance.”

“Nope.”

“What am I doing wrong? I mean, I think I’m doing pretty well as a pro Shogi player, I’m not that bad looking, and we’ve known each other forever ... Don’t you think it’s about time for love to be in the air?”

“You know what it might be, Master? Keika might only see you as little brother.”

“Ahh About that”

“Most women don’t consider younger men to be good options for a relationship. In general.”

“Is ... is that right?”

“There are stagistics.”

“Statistics?”

“Yes.”

Ai uses her smartphone to pull up a PDF and shows it to me. Apparently, it’s government research.

“..... This is complicated stuff for grade schoolers.”

“It’s part of a group project we’re doing in social studies class right now. We’re learning about Japan’s declining birthrate, so my group is researching late marriages.”

“Late marriages? Oh, late as in getting married at an older age.”

Ai’s small fingers swipe across the screen as she magnifies a specific section for me.

“Look at this. Women choose to be with older men more often than younger men.”

“You’re right! And they seem to be okay with a pretty big age gap?!”

“Women don’t have a problem with dating men ten years older than they are. Actually, my father is eight years older than my mother. He was twenty-six and she was eighteen when they got married.”

“Your mom was pretty young.”

Ai’s father married into the family business, so his opinions don’t mean much. But her parents are a very nice couple. They seem like a great fit.

“That’s why it’s better for men to be older in a relationship. Older men are more mature and have more money, which is what women are looking for. Plus, men like younger women because they feel like the protector. As research and real-life experience shows, relationships between older men and younger women always work out well. Let’s see Seven years’ difference would be the best.”

“Seven years younger than me a nine-year-old? Hmm, I really can’t picture it.”

“.....”

“But thinking about it from the other direction, now it makes sense why Keika treats me like a kid. It wouldn’t make sense to think of someone nine years

younger in *that way*, would it?”

“That’s not true!!”

“Whoa?! W-Where’d that anger come from?”

“I’m not angry!! Master *dara*!!”

Or so she says, storming on ahead and leaving her Master behind.

“Yeesh, what’s gotten into——?”

It clicked as soon as the words came out of my mouth. I figured out what she was trying to say.

..... Ai is encouraging me, I’m sure of it.

She’s scolding me for being a pitiful Master who got caught up in a simple age gap.

To think, she’d even support me in my quest to find love I have an amazing apprentice.

Statistics, hah! Government research, hah! If I were afraid to lose, I wouldn’t be playing Shogi, now would I?!!

“I got it, Ai! I’ll try even harder!”

“You will?!”

“You bet! I’ll find a way to get Keika to notice me!”

“Master *dara*! *Darabuchi*!!”

“Why?!”

The storm came back, and twice as angry as before. What went wrong? I can’t figure it out

But still, today was fun. I might’ve lost my match, but we went to the bathhouse for the first time in forever as a Shogi family, and it was nice to see how we’re all so close.

I was kind of worried about how things would change when I took an apprentice Big Sis and Ai aren't exactly the best of friends but Thanks to Keika, it looks like things are going to work out. Ai Yashajin should come next time.

It's almost like the stars in this early summer sky are lighting the way.

CRACKS

“Rain

Sunday. I look at the overcast gray sky, the seemingly never-ending misty rain outside my window and lethargically sigh.

“Isn’t it almost the rainy season? Great, just great. The laundry’ll never dry ...”

It wouldn’t be a problem if it was just me, but my apprentice is here too.

She’s pretty small, but girls’ laundry baskets fill up pretty quick. The biggest problem is that everything will smell weird if I hang all the clothes up inside. I can’t make Ai wear those.

“Maybe I should get a dryer. But, where would I put one? Should I just move? Nah, saying *I need a bigger room for my grade-school-aged apprentice* just doesn’t sound right ...”

Moving into a new home? Oh, they’ll ask questions alright.

“How the heck would I explain Ai to a realtor or a landlord? I doubt they’d understand that she’s a live-in apprentice and she certainly doesn’t look like my little sister, so they’d think we were engaged and probably call the police on the spot ...”

I look over at my tablet propped up on the table.

“What do you think, Ayumu?”

“Hah I couldn’t care less!”

Ayumu Kannabe, wearing a white cape, looked back at me from the other side of the split screen and sliced down my question like a well-timed Shogi strike.

“Alright then, how do you wash that bizarre wardrobe of yours?”

“Everything to the cleaners, what of it?”

“..... That’s got to cost an arm and a leg.”

Thinking about what I’d look like taking my apprentice’s panties and tiny clothes to the laundromat, I’m sure I’d lose something more valuable than money. That’s scary.

There’s a dryer at Master Kiyotaki’s place, so if worse comes to worse, I’ll ask Keika. I can always count on her in a jam.

“I’m as particular with my attire as I am with Shogi ... Therefore, I refuse to do laundry at my abode. I admit, the charges were a real shock at first”

“You wearing that cape at home is more of a shock if you ask me.”

“I am the Knight of the Shogi world! No matter how familiar the training partner, greeting them in full armor in battle is part of my knightly honor code ... Why not defend your own as a titleholder and dress for the occasion?!”

“..... I do dress appropriately when I’m sitting across from my opponent with a real board.”

I pull at my old T-shirt’s loose collar while giving this excuse.

Ayumu and I just finished playing a practice match over the Internet and started a review session over Skype ... But it turned into me asking for advice. It used to be that whenever players from the east and west got together for practice matches, one or the other would have to physically go there. But now, it’s getting more common for people to play over the Internet.

“By the way, Ayumu. About the league match I just had——.”

“Ah, yes. Your duel with Natagiri 8-*dan*. I remember it being recorded as a flawless victory for him.”

“Ugh! W-Well it ended up that way, but ...”

“His research gave him a clear advantage from the start. Choosing a strategy

that we here at the East Gate Legion have come to know puts the defender at a disadvantage and didn't help your cause. It's common knowledge at this point. Diving headfirst into it is a glaring indication of your ignorance."

"B-But I almost had him a couple of times?! There were a few reasons I couldn't hold out as long as I wanted to, but there was a moment in the late game I nearly turned the tables——!"

"*Gentei aigoma*. He knew the perfect way to block, and you still claim to have had a chance?"

"!A-About that"

"He knew exactly what you were going to do from the start and right up until the very last move Disgraceful! Absolutely disgraceful, Dragkin! Is that all my eternal foe is capable of?!!"

"*Aigoma*" ——when you deploy a piece from your piece stand to protect your King when in check.

Usually, there are many options that'll work out just fine in that situation, but there are some rare instances when there's only one right answer. That's *gentei aigoma*, or *genteiai* for short.

People who aren't too familiar with Shogi probably won't understand how truly amazing it is Think of *aigoma* as blocking a bullet with a shield, but *genteiai* is like slicing a bullet in half with a sword. It's a technique only the best of the best can pull off.

I took a look at the match record for myself when I got home and learned that he really had seen the *genteiai* coming It felt like I'd lost *a second time*.

The difference between us was as clear as day. I felt even more defeated than the moment I threw in the towel.

"Well, yeah, um. Would you happen to know anything about Mr. Natagiri? As in, are there any rumors going around about him?"

"I have heard mention that he trains with *The God*."

"Seriously?! With the Meijin?!"

The current Meijin is the best player in the Shogi world right now, without question. Many young players think of him as a deity, Ayumu and myself included.

"He he really is in a Practice Group with the Meijin? Mr. Natagiri? And *that* Meijin?"

"Yes, it is so."

"I see ..."

"I myself was invited to one of Natagiri 8-*dan*'s training sessions, so I am privy to this information."

"Really ...? ... Come again?!"

"I remember it being in the early days of summer last year ... The session was to take place at *The God*'s summer home. Natagiri 8-*dan* was gracious enough to extend an enthusiastic invitation along the lines of: *Overnight trips are a blast when it's just men*."

"....."

Yeah, about that

"The timing was not in my favor, so I had to decline."

"Y-You did? That's too bad."

I don't know why I feel relieved right now Please, always be Sir Ayumu: The Chaste, I'm begging you.

"If I may, Dragkin. Why are you so fixated on Natagiri 8-*dan*?"

"Nn?! W Well, I've lost three times in a row, and I've got another match against him coming up too."

“So, you seek information, no matter how trivial. It’s not as though I can’t relate to that feeling but

Ayumu doesn’t look all that convinced. He’s the type of player who firmly believes that people who play Shogi should only think about what happens on the board. You’d think by looking at him that he was an expert at psychological warfare, but he has no idea ...

“Anyway. Ayumu, how about another match?”

“I decline.”

“Why? The Practice League is meeting today, so I’ve got nothing to do until my apprentice comes home. Come on, just one more.”

“I decline!” he says, without a moment’s hesitation, before putting on Chap stick and explaining why. “One of my favorite clothing designers is announcing their latest product tonight!”

“You’re going to buy even more of that weird stuff?!”

“Hah Your inquiry is pointless!”

Swish! Ayumu places his left hand over his face in one of his usual poses. It’s meaning is beyond me, but there must be some deeper purpose, like setting up a *yagura* fortress. Probably.

“I bid you good day, Dragkin!!”

Whoosh! His cape flashes in front of the screen, and Sir Ayumu, God Cauldron, cuts the connection as soon as the picture goes dark. He had it all timed out perfectly.

“..... I swear, I burn more calories just talking with the guy than I do playing Shogi with him

I let out a long sigh and pick up my tablet to turn on the software. It’s time to review our match.

“He’s right. I’m falling behind early.”

Watching the pieces move across the electronic board, it’s pretty clear that Ayumu has done a lot more research than me. I hate to admit it, but it’s the truth.

“It always seems that the east is ahead of us when it comes to researching the latest trends. And it doesn’t look like Ayumu showed me everything he knows ...”

He and I are almost the same age, same skill level, we’ve known each other for years and the two of us rarely play against each other with him being in Kanto and me in Kansai. There’s very little downside to practicing against each other for either one of us.

That’s why we’ve been doing matches over the Internet like this since our days in the Sub League.

Of course, we stop when we’re scheduled for a match against each other, but we start back up again once it’s over. We’re pretty easygoing about it.

That being said, this world is built on fierce competition. Neither of us is going to show all our cards.

Then——.

“If my own research keeps falling behind his Ayumu won’t have a reason to do practice matches”

If that happens, these Internet sessions will disappear entirely.

If playing is *worth the time*, then someone will always be willing to do so. But if not, they’d never agree to play. That’s one of the unwritten rules of the Shogi world.

People who play with superficial knowledge get looked down on. Even having a title doesn't mean much.

Only being recognized as *strong* will do that.

“So, it comes down to strength, huh. Looks like I’ve got a wall to break through

Since when? It’s been on my mind for a while now.

—Have I gotten stronger?

I’ve achieved my childhood dream of becoming a pro Shogi player. I’m even at the top of the world: the Ryuo.

However I don’t *feel* like I’m any better than I used to be.

I may be better mentally thanks to meeting the Ais, but I don’t think I’ve improved at all when it comes to techniques and strategies. I mean, I’ve lost to the same guy three times in a row. There’s the proof.

“My *wall* Jin Natagiri. If I can’t beat him

I want to be stronger, better. I know I do. I have to improve.

The problem is *how*.

“I can’t keep practicing the same way. Something has to change on a more basic level.”

Because if I don’t, I’ll never be able to surpass Mr. Natagiri’s research, let alone go beyond his study partner.

“Break the wall ... Change something fundamental about myself, get stronger

In order to do that, what I need to do now is—

“Alright! To the bathhouse!!”

I turn off my tablet, stand up and start getting ready to go.

“The Practice League meeting should be over by now. In that case

I take out my smartphone and give Keika a call.

It took a few moments to get through, but I start talking once I hear her pick

up on the other end.

“Ah! Keika?! It’s Yaichi. Are you still at the association? If you are, could you bring Ai with you back to Master’s house? I was thinking it would be fun to go to a bathhouse with everyone like the other day. Oh, but I’ve got a different place in mind this time. I’ll head over to meet you two once I finish getting ready——.”

“Sorry. Please, don’t contact me for a while.”

..... Huh?

“I’m sorry, I just don’t want to see you. You, or Ai.”

Her voice has never sounded so cold. I scramble to get words out of my mouth as chills running down my spine.

“K-Keika?! Why——?!”

But instead of an answer, even before I finish the question ... She hung up on me.

“..... Why?”

I just stood there, holding my smartphone against my face with only the sound of the rain in my ears.

..... She doesn’t want to see me? Me, or Ai?

..... Why?

On that day, rainy season officially arrived in Osaka.

RECORD 2



PLAYER INTRODUCTION

Mitsuru Oishi "King"

- PLAYER NUMBER: 223
- BIRTHDATE: April 29th
- HOMETOWN: Osaka City
- MASTER: Daijirou Ootsuchi 9-dan
- RYUO MATCH: 1st Group (8 seasons)
- PLACEMENT: A League (A Class: 12 seasons)
- TITLE HISTORY:

TITLE MATCH APPEARANCES:	11
TOTAL TITLES:	6

When did I start feeling like this? When was it that I started to dread going to these reunion parties?

“..... Twenty-five,” I whisper while walking along the Doujima River to clear my head after a night of drinking.

My old high school classmates and I got together at this fancy little restaurant in Umeda. Everyone looked so happy: smiling and laughing.

We talked mostly about *relationships*, *work* and *marriage*. A few of my classmates brought babies with them.

Of course they did. That’s *normal*.

“..... Already twenty-five years old.”

Back in high school, I thought *twenty-five* was somewhere off in the distant future, a bona fide adult.

I thought I’d be married and working by the time I turned twenty-two, and I thought it was only natural that I would have children by twenty-five. So, naturally, all that would happen without having to prepare or even really try because, after all, that was *normal*.

However, I went against that *normal*.

“*I’ll become a Women’s League Player.*”

I made that decision when I was eighteen.

While it was obviously a late start, I didn’t feel any pressure at the time. My high school classmates were going off to college, getting jobs and going on with their lives. I felt like I was doing exactly the same thing when I entered the Practice League.

Even though we were pursuing different goals, getting together with them

was fun.

Our coming-of-age ceremony when we turned twenty was one heck of a party in its own right, and, even after that, whenever we met up we'd shoot the breeze and just have a good time.

But about the time the ones who went to college graduated and started careers little by little it got harder to relate to them.

I've never been in a serious relationship, let alone a marriage, and never went through job hunting because I focused solely on Shogi. It took a while to notice, but I was left behind.

"What have you been up to, Keika?"

Always afraid someone would ask that question, I never said anything and always sat in the corner with a fake smile on my face. It was pitiful.

"Already twenty- five"

I was too embarrassed to be this old and still chasing dreams like some child.

Looking at everyone who had achieved the *normal* that I'd rejected made me jealous. And admitting I was jealous hurt. Talk about pathetic

The burning in my chest didn't come from the spicy food or the strong cocktails.

The pins and needles were still there when I got home and weighed on me during the Practice League session on Sunday I lost every match.

■ KYOUBASHI DUNGEON

“The next station is Kyoubashi, Kyoubashi ...”

“Master? We’re getting out here, right?”

“.....”

“Master!”

“Ah! W-What’s up?”

“This is Kyoubashi.”

“Seriously?!”

I jumped to my feet. The doors were seconds away from closing.

“Oh crap! Let’s go, Ai!”

My bag, stuffed with my towel and a change of clothes, was clutched in my hand and we managed to get off the train at the last possible second.

My apprentice looked at me with a look of curious concern in her eyes once we stepped out onto the platform and she asked, “Did something happen, Master? You’ve been in your own little world since we got on the train”

“Have I? Nothing’s wrong I guess I’m just tired.”

“Okay then, it’s good we’re going to a bathhouse! You can get refreshed!”

Ai, having never been here before, has a bit of pep in her step as we go through the station. But that conversation I had over the phone with Keika has been replaying in my head this whole time. What happened to her? She won’t pick up her phone either

We go out the station’s north exit and take a right—when Ai says with bubbly excitement, “Oh, wow!! W-What is this place?!”

“Interesting, wouldn’t you say? The station is literally part of a shopping

district.”

This whole area looks like it got lost in time ... Well, like a bunch of old bars did anyway.

“Uwhoa I’ve never been to such a dark and jumbled place before! It’s like a cave over here! This could be fun!”

“Ha-ha A cave, you say.”

It’s hard not to smile at a grade schooler’s blunt way of describing things.

New World is pretty much a tourist destination at this point, but Osaka’s old atmosphere is alive and well at Kyoubashi. It’s called *Deep Osaka* for a reason.

That being said, it’s a lot safer than it used to be, and there are a lot of really nice houses on the opposite side of the station now, so there are a lot of women and students out and about. There’s even an *Animate* store around here.

“Oh! Is that the bathhouse you were talking about, Master?!”

Advancing through this dungeon-esque shopping arcade, Ai points to one of the signs lit up by sparkling lights.

“Adult Relaxation Space ~Busty Bubbles~”

Not good.

“No that’s not really a bathhouse”

“It’s not? Okay, then what about *Mistress Hot Spring ~Some Like It Hot~?*”

“No, definitely not! T-There, that one over there!”

I grab my apprentice’s hand and lead her away from the questionable establishments.

“..... This one.”

Unlike the other places with their neon lights and sparkling signs, this old two-

story wooden building looks rather plain.

Ai glances at the curtain hanging outside the front door and tries to read the characters written on it,

“*Go-ki-gen-no-yu?*”

“That’s right. The Gokigen Bathhouse. It means *happy-go-lucky*.”

Pulling back the curtain, someone I haven’t seen in a while comes into view.

“Evening, Asuka. Is Maestro upstairs?”

“.....”

The girl standing at the attendant’s booth looks back at me in silence, her jaw hanging open.

Five seconds passed before there was any change. Her eyes, hidden behind her bangs, went wide.

“Y-Yai-?”

“Ah, yeah. I’m Yaichi. Yaichi Kuzuryu, the Shogi Player. Do you remember me?”

“.....!!!!”

Her head jolts up and down like there’s a spring in her neck.

“So, is your father upstairs?”

“.....!!!!”

Even more furious nodding. That’s going to hurt!? A neck sprain maybe!?

“Okay, one adult and one child, please.”

“..... S.”

I hand the money to Asuka over the counter. This bathhouse is more expensive than most, but there’s a reason for it.

“When did your father get back? At the beginning of the month?”

“..... S.”

“I see. Well, then I guess my timing’s perfect.”

“.....”

Asuka’s face is the same color as freshly boiled lobster. All hopes of getting answers out of her just went out the window.

“We’ll head to the bath later. First, I’ve got a match to play upstairs.”

With that, I lead my apprentice up the stairwell.

“Master Do you know that girl?”

“Her father owns this place. I know her and she knows me, but she’s always so quiet. I don’t think I’ve really talked to her all that much.”

“..... She’s really cute.”

“You think so?”

“..... You know too many girls, Master.”

“Nah, that couldn’t be. You only remember the girls because you’re a girl yourself, Ai.”

“..... *Darabuchi.*”

She sounds a bit mad

But that anger didn’t last for long.

“Is that music?”

Someone’s playing the piano upstairs. That beautiful melody has Ai’s full attention.

Her eyes opened as wide as they could in surprise the moment we stepped onto the second floor.

“Is Is this a Shogi classroom?! But this is a bathhouse?! And music?”

Just as Ai said, the Gokigen Bathhouse’s second floor is a spacious Shogi

classroom.

With live jazz piano filling the air and all the stylish decorations, it's more like a fancy jazz bar.

And the owner of this unusual place is——.

“Maestro.”

“..... Ah, Yaichi.”

The black-suited man playing piano in the corner of the classroom slowly turns around to face me.

“Worldly Maestro———King. Mitsuru Oishi.”

One of the best of the best, twelve seasons in the A League and six as a titleholder, it's safe to say that not only the Kansai Shogi world, but *half* the Shogi fans worldwide revere him.

“It's been a while, Maestro. Half a year, maybe?”

“The last time we spoke, you had yet to become Ryuo so That sounds about right.”

“You went on another pilgrimage through Kyushu, didn't you? A rather troublesome job fell into my lap because you weren't here.”

“That apprentice thing? There was a message on my machine from the chairman This little lady here is the one?”

“No, she's another apprentice of mine actually”

Mr. Oishi hardly ever comes by the association unless he is scheduled for a match, and he doesn't participate in any practice groups and doesn't do versus matches with anyone. The Shogi world's lone wolf; he tends to be out of the loop. I doubt he knows Ai Hinatsuru.

“Well, have a seat.”

The Worldly Maestro took his fingers away from the piano keys and got to his

feet, directing me to an open board as he spoke.

“You came all this way. Why not join me for a slight adventure?”

🏠 WORLDLY MAESTRO

“This is a first. I never thought you’d invite me to play a game of Shogi, Mr. Oishi.”

Bolstered by my unexpected good luck, I open my Bishop’s Path.

“Only because I haven’t played in a blue moon And I’d like to know ...”

“Know what?”

“To see if my edge has gotten rusty. And——.”

Mr. Oishi took a cigarette out of a beat-up package and set it alight between his fingers as he added, “To see how strong the Ryuo is.”

Going second, he opens his own Bishop Path before advancing his fifth column Pawn forward and moves his Rook to the center of the board. He’s using his best strategy to see just how good I am.

An offensive Ranging Rook strategy with an open Bishop’s Path: “Gokigen Central Rook.”

“YEAH!!” The other people watching us had been quiet until that point, but then the whole gallery erupted once Mr. Oishi brought Goki-Central to bear.

It’s said that Ranging Rook is by and large a defensive strategy.

But Gokigen Central Rook is just the opposite. It charges forward in a blaze of glory to take down an opponent before they can build a defensive formation, what pretty much everyone instinctively tries to do when they play Shogi. That’s why Goki-Central has such a big following among half of all Shogi fans.

Half: in other words—the Ranging Rook *party*.

When it comes to pros, the overwhelming majority, myself included, belong to the Static Rook *party*. Mr. Oishi is the one and only true Ranging Rook *party* member with a title, as well as the only one in the A League.

Sometimes called the Ranging Rook *party president* due to that impressive resume, his light-footed, yet beautiful, minute and perfectly timed playing style charms anyone who sees it.

He can take over a Shogi board with a simple swish of his Rook like a tactful conductor controls an orchestra ... That's where his nickname Maestro comes from: his playing style. Although Mr. Oishi prefers jazz to classical music.

"Ohh? You want to know what the Ryuo can do? Then I won't hold anything back!"

Rising to his challenge, I set up to counter his Goki-Central with what we Static Rook players have determined to be the best strategy right now.

"Extreme Speed is it? (sigh) Well, that could be a problem," Mr. Oishi whispers while holding his cigarette in front of his face.

Extreme Speed is exactly what it sounds like——getting a Silver out in front as quickly as possible to pin the Rook back and keep it there.

My goal is simple.

Just like a true Static Rook player, I build up my offensive forces on the right side of the board, in front of my own Rook, while moving defensive pieces into position in front of my King on the left. After that, all I have to do is crush the enemy between the two!

Everything was going according to plan, Mr. Oishi's Rook was stuck in the center of the board. I was in a perfect position to win.

"..... How's that for you?"

"It's not over yet."

"You're going to hold out? What could you possibly do at this point?"

"..... You'll find out soon enough."

Mr. Oishi flashes a confident grin and reaches for his pinned Rook with his cigarette sandwiched between his fingers and whispers, "What the *Worldly* can do."

The unbelievable happened a heartbeat later.

Everyone around us couldn't help but gasp in disbelief.

"No way——"



**EXTREME
SPEED!**

**3 SEVEN
SILVER**

“He sacrificed the Rook?!”

Yes, that happened.

Just as soon as I knew I had the Rook under control, Mr. Oishi *throws it away* like he saw it coming.

“Say what?! W-Why would?! Wait, don’t tell me——!!”

I figured out what he was trying to do as soon as I saw that Rook charge headlong into my formation.

Every move I’ve made thus far has been to keep that Rook under control.

So: the entire formation becomes pointless and crumbles if the Rook isn’t there.

It makes perfect sense. Logically. Perfectly logical.

“But Who in their right mind would actually do that?!”

“Happy-go-lucky, wouldn’t you say?”

Everything that happened after that was like magic.

The Maestro sacrificed his Bishop along with his Rook, advancing on my King with only small pieces and taking the victory.

Looking back on it, I came to terms with the fact that the match turned into a horrible loss only a few turns after I thought it was in the bag.

I-It was!

Unbelievable, a Shogi style that works like magic——

“That was Worldly!”

“Heh. It seems I haven’t lost my touch.”

The whole gallery gets on their feet and showers the Maestro with praise.

“Bravo!!”

“Encore!!”

Words that don’t belong in a Shogi classroom echo off the walls. My apprentice, who saw the match from a front row seat, is clapping her hands like mad, still captivated by what she saw. Easy now (grimace).

Then again As much it hurts to admit, I get it. I know how she feels.

Even Chairman Tsukimitsu has been overwhelmed by Mr. Oishi’s *worldly* style. Unable to do anything, it’s said that he simply groaned, saying, “*My senses are broken.*”

And I, more than anyone else the one who lost to this worldly poetry in motion was inspired by it.

I knew it.

I just knew that this man here——!!

“..... Mr. Oishi!”

“Yeah?”

“I have a favor to ask you. I’ve been a Static Rook player since the day I was born. My Master, his Master and his Master before him were all part of the Static Rook



party.”

Everyone in my Shogi family, including my apprentice, plays Static Rook. I used everything that style has to offer to become the youngest person in history to ever hold the title *Ryuo*. I have considered every Ranging Rook player to be my enemy.

I lower my head all the way down to the board in front of their best player and yell, “Please Teach me how to play Ranging Rook!!”

▲ RANGING ROOK

“What?! M-Master Are you going to join the Ranging Rook *party*?”

The first one to respond to my request was Ai.

Her clapping hands hanging frozen in midair, she screamed until she was blue in the face.

“Y-You wouldn’t! You always call it *Failing Rook*! You always say that you never knew what would make someone want to use such a useless strategy!”

“PWFF?! H-Hold on a second, Ai——.”

“That the Ranging Rook *party* is a wretched lot stuck in the past who play without a plan, depending on lucky fingers and a prayer?! You’ve said that to me so many times that I try my hardest every day to never lose to someone who plays Ranging Rook!”

“Ai! Shh! SHHHHHH——!!”

She’s not making this up. I’ve poked fun at the Ranging Rook playing style before but ... Coming here to the Ranging Rook capital and saying those things would be like cheering for the Giants at a Tigers game at Koushien Stadium here in Osaka, like wearing a New York Yankees jersey at Fenway Park in Boston. I-I won’t make it out of here alive!

The Shogi fans here at the classroom (all Ranging Rook *party* members) menacingly glare at me, the Ryuo, and start whispering among themselves.

“..... Kuzuryu’s only ever been Static Rook since he was a kid, right?”

“Yeah. Won the elementary school Meijin Tournament with Static, and was that way in the Sub League if I remember right”

“Word is he’s into little girls, too”

“Yeah. Into them”

They're right about the Shogi part. Only the Shogi part.

"..... I can't deny I've always played Static Rook. I've played hundreds, if not thousands of matches against Ranging Rook players, thinking of them as the enemy ... I've studied and researched as hard as I could to wipe them out completely."

As I put my hand over my squirming apprentice's mouth to keep her quiet, I explain the reason why I want to give Ranging Rook a try. "However! It didn't matter how outnumbered they were or how much research we did, Static Rook players have failed to eliminate the Ranging Rook *party*! Therefore, there must be something to the strategy that Static Rook doesn't have! I want to learn what it is and use it myself! To become worldly, like you, Maestro!!"

There's a deep divide between the Static and Ranging Rook players.

Even Big Sis, back when she was four years old and meeting Mr. Oishi for the first time, walked right up to him and said, "So, you're Mitsuru?" As if rudely calling him by his first name wasn't enough, she followed that up with, "Stop picking on Master!! All Ranging Rook players should just go away and never come back!!"

Master was shocked, and the Maestro could only force a smile.

No matter how many times in a row our Master had gone against Mr. Oishi in league matches and lost, to actually go up and say it to his face like that ... It was quite the shock, and I was only a six-year-old bystander back then. She's been a terror since before kindergarten.

Despite getting off on the wrong foot, Mr. Oishi has always been kind to Big Sis and me. I think it's probably because we're about the same age as his daughter. Asuka and I were in the same year in school.

That's why he might help me out.

At least, that's what I was banking on when I asked, but—.

“..... Alright. I get where you’re coming from.”

“! So, you’ll——.”

“And? Why do I have to teach you how to play Ranging Rook?”

“W-Well ... I’m not asking you to do it for free, more like a give-and-take. I’ll let you in on the latest strategies that Static Rook players are using as a study partner”

“Partner? Someone who was so easily overpowered by my worldly symphony—my partner?”

“Ugh!”

“Not to mention, Yaichi. I saw you lost to Natagiri yet again.”

“..... I did.”

“Which would mean you’ve never won a single match against him.”

“..... I haven’t.”

“Pitiful Natagiri was the bottom feeder of my generation, I’ll have you know.”

Mr. Natagiri is thirty-eight years old. So is Mr. Oishi.

They may be the same age, but the timing of their pro debuts and accomplishments was completely different. Mr. Oishi went pro, rose all the way to the A League and even claimed a title in his twenties, while Mr. Natagiri joined the A League only last year and has only appeared in one title match.

While I think that’s a more than decent resume, Mr. Oishi is pretty harsh on Mr. Natagiri. Maybe it’s the rivalry between Kansai and Kanto?

“The Ryuo, losing to that? Losing to that talentless wannabe I played against him all the time in the Sub League’s 3-*dan* division and never lost once.”

My apologies. I’ve already lost three times.

“Natagiri finally turned professional after I was gone. My happy-go-lucky Gokigen always had his number.”

“So, what’s your point?! Master is the Ryuo! He is the best there is!! He doesn’t need to learn how to play some Ranging strategy with a weird name! We’re the ones turning you down!!” Ai broke away from me, gasping for breath before jumping to her feet and unleashing that tirade. HEEEEEEY?!

“Listen, Ai I’m not the best player, and if I don’t learn Ranging Rook——.”

“Why?! You’re the best just the way you are! Your *aigakari* is unbeatable! You don’t need to learn any kind of Ranging Rook!! Isn’t that right?!”

“Ai”

Seeing me use *aigakari* in the Ryuo title match is what inspired her to play Shogi in the first place.

That’s why her first move is always to advance the Pawn in front of her Rook Basically, she has a bias for Static Rook.

That’s because she idolizes my playing style and why she stubbornly claims that I’m the *best*.

Hearing her say that makes me really happy ... But, that bias needs to go.

She won’t be able *to keep winning in the Practice League* if she doesn’t get rid of it.

“..... Ai, what’s your strategy if you go first?”

“*Aigakari!!*”

“And if you go second?”

“*Aigakari!!!*”

“So, let’s say that you perfect *aigakari* to the point that you always win with it if you go first.”

“Yay! No one could beat me on offense!!”

“But, you’d always lose on defense, yes?”

“.....?”

Ai, in the middle of a happy dance, comes to a sudden stop.

“M-Master! There’s a problem! I’d have nothing to play on defense!!”

“Let’s take it a step further. Do you think you could successfully defend against a strategy that has been determined to be unbeatable?”

“Huh? Of course, I don’t think I could ... Oh no?!”

“You see my point?”

“M-Master! There’s an even bigger problem!! I’d have nothing to play on offense!!”

“That’s right. The defensive player will always avoid playing against a style once that particular strategy is determined to be unbeatable on offense. Therefore that strategy never shows up on the board again. In other words, an *unbeatable* strategy is pointless.”

“The pro world is rough”

“Perfection is just a dream.”

Men, no matter who they are, want to have that one ultimate weapon: a strategy that guarantees victory.

But the moment they get it, it becomes moot in the pro Shogi world.

That man, who should’ve become the greatest of all time, has his one and only weapon taken away and falls back to the bottom.

“That’s why it’s too risky to specialize in one strategy or another. At the very least, very few of those players make it to the top.”

Shogi strategies come and go in a very short cycle.

Players who were dominating with a certain strategy in the spring just can’t

seem to win once summer comes around.

“When I have the first move, I play *aigakari*. When I move second, Move-Loss Bishop Exchange is my strategy of choice. However, my opponents can easily avoid those patterns if they want to. That’s why I never get a chance to play them when I’m on a roll and get targeted when I’m on a losing streak. I need more variety to get good at several strategies.”

It’s just like baseball.

A pitcher might have a slider as sharp as a razor’s edge, but the batter’s eyes will adjust if that’s all that comes their way.

“There’s a chance that might work in a sudden-death tournament, but the league matches start soon And the placement matches too. In C-2, where I am, the competition is so fierce that I’ll have to win out to have any hope of advancing. I want as many cards up my sleeve as possible. Especially ones that my opponents won’t see coming.”

“And that’s why you want Ranging Rook?”

“Yes. It will be quite a surprise if someone who’s played only Static Rook like me were to use Ranging Rook, and——.”

“Playing Ranging Rook is a great idea!”

Mr. Oishi had been quietly listening but suddenly jumped into the conversation.

“Static Rook only has three patterns: the *yaguras*, Bishop Exchanges and Aerial Battles,” Mr. Oishi explains while holding up three fingers.

On a side note, *aigakari* and Side Pawn Capture fall into the Aerial Battle category because big pieces like the Bishop and Rook fly around the board as if locked in a dogfight.

“But Ranging Rook is different! First, there’s the Central Rook strategies, Third-File Rook, Fourth-File Rook and Opposing Rook. That’s already more

patterns than Static Rook!”

“Ooo?!”

Ai has sparkles in her eyes.

“But wait! Ranging Rook also has defensive formations like the *mino gakoi* and *anaguma*! Combine them with the other strategies, and that’s eight different patterns! More than double what Static Rook can do!!”

“OOOO!!”

“There’s more! Whether or not you execute, a Bishop Exchange plays a major role, so double those: sixteen different patterns! Not to mention the wild frontier known as *Ai furibisha* where both players use Ranging Rook strategies! That’s seventeen patterns altogether!! Six times the options compared to what Static Rook can do!!”

“Master! Ranging Rook is amazing! So many possibilities!!”

“Wait, wait, wait. Just hold on a second. That’s not how it is.”

I pull my very nearly brainwashed apprentice back down to earth. I’ve heard some weird logic before, but this was ridiculous

“If you follow that line of thinking, then Static Rook has five patterns: *yagura*, Bishop Exchange, Move-Loss Bishop Exchange, *aigakari* and Side Pawn Capture—not to mention the limitless defensive formations you can add it to each of them.”

“Oo Ooo?”

Ai looks up at me in confusion, head tilted as if there’s a big “?” floating over her. Adorable.

“So, in the end Static and Ranging: which one is better?”

Mr. Oishi and I speak at the same time, our voices drowning each other out.

“Static Rook, of course.”

“Ranging Rook, without question.”

“*Cough.*” I clear my throat as the two of us exchange cautionary glances before I give my apprentice a straight answer.

“..... It’s not about *which one is better*. It’s being *able to use both* that makes someone the best.”

“Both? But, can that——?”

“It can be done,” I say with as much authority as I can muster. Finally, I have a strong image of what I want to become in my head.

“At the very least, players who can do both are in the best position.”

“The best? But, you’re the best, Master You’re the Ryuo, aren’t you?”

“I don’t even come close. It’s not just me. No Shogi player in history measures up to him.”

“And Who would that be?”

“The Meijin.”

Twenty-five years before I turned pro, he appeared on the scene as the third junior high school pro Shogi player in history ... A genius who conquered the Shogi world in the blink of an eye.

He claimed all seven titles, a few of which he still has, and became someone who everyone had to recognize as the best.

“It’s true that using both Static Rook and Ranging Rook is very difficult. If it were easy, everybody would be doing it ... But only a handful of people actually can. I think you need to be as talented as the best Shogi players and need to train so much that Shogi gets engrained into your blood in order to pull it off. I don’t know if I have it in me. But——.”

If that’s the path that leads to being the *best*.

If that’s how to break my *wall*. If that’s the way to improve.

The way to become a player who can perfectly execute Static Rook and Ranging Rook strategies——.

To become someone everyone recognizes as the best, like him——.

“I will become——an All-Rounder!!!”

Mr. Oishi looks stunned. He’s not the only one. Everyone in the room looks at me with wide eyes after my declaration. Becoming an All-Rounder is a dream that’s hard to fulfill.

No amount of determination will guarantee things will work out the way you want. Making that kind of claim is bold, for sure.

But I’m the one who turns that determination into reality. It’s all on my shoulders.

That determination, that courage probably came from seeing my apprentice improve so quickly.

As for that apprentice, Ai looks at me and says, “M Master That was so cool ≡”

Hands on her cheeks, she looks up at me after my All-Rounder declaration like she’s in a trance.

“D-Do you really think so? Is it?”

“You can do it! I’ll become an All-Rounder with you!!”

She follows behind me like an innocent little puppy, but suddenly looks concerned and says, “Ah, but How would you play Ranging Rook?”

“All you need to play Ranging Rook is a heart filled with burning passion,” interjects Mr. Oishi with confidence.

Crap, now Ranging Rook sounds cool

“Why not learn how to play Ranging Rook right here if you’re interested? I’ll even teach you myself.”

“Really?!”

The Maestro’s offer makes Ai’s eyes sparkle. Hey!

“Hey, hey, Mr. Oishi?! Didn’t you just refuse to teach me——.”

“I just didn’t see any real benefit to you playing Ranging Rook, but a cute young lady like her? Ranging Rook will become more popular overnight, don’t you think? That’s what give and take is all about. So, tell me young lady, what’s your name?”

“Ai Hinatsuru, I’m in the fourth grade! D-1 in the Practice League!”

“Ai, meaning *love* A great name. Half the world is built on love”

“What about the other half?”

“Ranging Rook, what else would it be?”

So then, where’s Static Rook?

“She’s got a lot of spunk. Osakan?”

“No. She’s from Ishikawa Prefecture Wakura was it? Her family owns an inn with a hot spring there. That’s where last year’s Ryuo title match was held, and seeing that is what got her into Shogi in the first place——.”

“Wakura hot spring? Hinatsuru?”

The *cool as a cucumber* look on Mr. Oishi’s face was gone in an instant.

“Hinatsuru! Are you talking about Hinatsuru?! As in the best hot spring inn in Japan?!”

“I believe so.”

“Slow down ... How would a young lady with *that* kind of background end up as your apprentice?”

“Well, it’s hard to explain. Going with the flow? I guess?”

I’m not exactly sure how it came to this myself.

“And the Ryuo title match was last Christmas, yes? And she’s already in D-1? You’re pulling my leg, right?”

“No, that’s true. She finished *Zukou* three months after learning how to play. All by herself too.”

“*Zukou* *Shogi Zukou*, that book of Shogi puzzles? Yaichi, if you’re going to lie, at least make it believable——.”

“Ai.”

“Yees?”

“King’s line, 8 One King, 9 One Lance, 8 Three Pawn, 7 Four Bishop, 9 Four Gold. Attacking line, 5 Two Rook, 5 Three Promoted Bishop. Silver on the piece stand.”

“5 Four Promoted Bishop, 6 Three Silver, 9 Two Silver, taken by the Lance, 6 Three Promoted Bishop, taken by the Bishop, 8 Two Silver to checkmate.”

“?! A-all that in her head in the blink of an eye ... For real?”

Mr. Oishi wasn’t the only one gawking, everyone was looking at Ai with their mouths hanging open ... I’m not sure when she came upstairs, but Asuka is in the crowd with the same shocked look on her face.

The problem I just gave Ai is called a High Road Shogi puzzle. Just to clear up any confusion, it’s one of the puzzles that stumps a lot of people. The sequence is pretty short, but it’s hard to figure out.

And this tiny little girl did it in no time flat Add in the fact that she did it all in her head, it’d be impossible *not* to be surprised.

“.....”

Mr. Oishi looks like his brain is going a mile a minute as he lights another cigarette and takes several long drags.

“Hmm I see. Yes Alright then.”

One quick glance at his daughter and a satisfied nod later, Mr. Oishi put out the cigarette and turned to face me and Ai.

“Yaichi.”

“Yeah?”

“I’ve got a lot on my plate with A League placement matches right around the corner. A good sparring partner could be just what I need to get the competitive juices flowing, and I want a particularly skilled someone to help out around the bathhouse. To be blunt, I’d give an arm and a leg for a *young gun type* player to join the Ranging Rook ranks. Therefore, I’d like to hire a part-timer.”

“Say what? A part-time worker?”

“Very much so. Someone to help run the bathhouse and work as a classroom assistant. If it’s alright with you, I’ll set the terms right now.”

“H-Hire a title holder as part-time help?!”

“No. I’m talking about Ai.”

“Huh?! Then what about me?!”

“You’re part of Ai’s deal, an extra perk.”

“Whaaat?”

What happened to me being her Master?

“No bellyaching. I’ll train both of you at once. Over the next two weeks, I’ll make you into perfect Ranging Rook players, so much so that you’ll feel like something’s missing if the Rook doesn’t travel side to side. Oh, and one more thing——.”

“One more thing?”

The *Worldly Maestro* grins as Ai and I ask the same thing at the same time.

“You won’t need to be paid, right?”

Glug! “Ahh!”

Ai and I each take a big swig from bottles of milk at the same time.

“I tell you Nothing beats a bath after playing Shogi.”

“Fruity milk is delicious≡”

Ai also had several practice matches with Mr. Oishi after our discussion and then both of us went down to the first-floor baths to get some well-needed rest and relaxation after a long day. We capped off our Master—apprentice evening with some nice cold milk. Good times.

“Master Can I ask you something?”

“What’s up?”

“Why is there a Shogi classroom on the second floor of this bathhouse?”

“I don’t know the details but Pretty much every bathhouse back in the 1700s and 1800s had a second floor and lots of people would play Shogi and Go there.”

“Is this place that old?!”

“I doubt it’s the same building ... but yeah.”

What I do know for sure is that one of the oldest, if not the oldest, Shogi classroom above a bathhouse in the country is right here in Osaka.

“Mr. Oishi started playing Shogi against customers before he knew right from left right here in this bathhouse and just kept getting better and better. Most amateurs play Ranging Rook, so that was how he learned to play and he just kept using it. I can still hear him saying: *What’s the point of pros playing in a way that amateurs don’t even try?*”

Mr. Oishi strongly believes that pros only exist because of amateurs and often comes right out and says he *puts on a show with Ranging Rook*. That's probably how he got his almost poetic timing and worldly sense.

Just watching him pursue his idea of beauty makes fans go nuts.

"So, what did you think, playing against Mr. Oishi's Ranging Rook?"

"It was amazing! Everything happened like magic. I couldn't read the board at all! Bishops and Rooks just came flying in from out of nowhere! Zoom! And the board changed before I knew it, too How did he do that?!"

"I think, maybe, you were looking at different things."

"Whaa?"

"You try to avoid a battle until you've built up a perfect formation when playing Static Rook, but Ranging Rook requires a broader sense—in other words, you charge right in and exchange as many pieces as you can early and often throughout the match. It makes the pieces *warp* around the board."

"Warp?"

"You know how you can deploy a piece anywhere you want once you have it on your piece stand, yeah? Even pieces that would normally require many turns to get into position can go there right away. What's more, it's a piece that wasn't on your side at first."

"Ah! That would change the board top to bottom?!"

"Right. The match can look completely different after just a few turns."

Exchanging pieces makes the board so much more complicated, like an explosion of variables all at once.

I don't think it needs to be said, but that makes anticipating the next few moves a heck of a lot harder.

"It happens in the late game no matter how many pieces are exchanged

but since Ranging Rook relies on more of a worldly sense, even the mid-game can turn on its head at any time. That's why you have to visualize what's going to happen *after taking an opponent's piece*."

"After?"

"But reading far ahead in the mid-game when there are so many options is impossible. Did you know that there are 11 trillion 600 billion possible combinations by the ninth move in a game of Shogi?"

"There are?! ... 11 trillion?!"

"That goes up to 328 trillion on the tenth move. No one could possibly read that far ahead."

It's pretty common for there to be a scene in Shogi manga where a character says something cool like, "Hahaha Only ~~ moves until checkmate!" However, that could never happen in real life. The only one who says that kind of thing and actually means it is Ayumu.

"That's why visualizing what's going to happen two or three turns later is less of a *prediction* and more of a *perception*. You must rely on a sense that tells you: *it'll probably go like this*. You have to *feel* it."

"Per ... cep tion?"

"Basically, a *gut feeling*. But it's a gut feeling that's been honed by countless matches and a lot of experience."

It's like the way a master craftsman can make something more precise than a machine by doing what *feels* right.

"Static Rook and Ranging Rook approach Shogi differently, so of course each looks for different things on the board. That's why their perceptions are different. Since Ranging Rook has to deal with more variables than Static Rook, those players tend to have sharper game *sense* than solid logic. At least that's how I see it."

“Wow Ranging Rook is amazing. There’s so much to it

“But Ai, you need to master Ranging Rook asap. You won’t be able to keep winning in the Practice League if you don’t.”

“Huh?! Why

“You know how you play with *handicaps* when going against someone with a different rank? Up until now, you’ve benefited from having the extra piece ... but you’ll be the upper player pretty soon. Usually, the left Lance gets dropped but——.”

Ai has already played against opponents much weaker than herself without using her big pieces.

But when it’s another member of the Practice League Being down one piece when going against someone nearly at your level is a whole different story.

“Without the Lance, that side of the formation will never hold up. That’s why you have to find a way to cover for it, like moving the Rook to take its place, and still find a way to win.”

“Ah! I get it That’s Ranging Rook?!”

“Right. That’s why I want you to get a good Ranging Rook sense right now.”

And I want her to have the best teacher to learn that sense. That’s why I brought her here with me today.

Which reminds me. The Practice League——.

“By the way, Ai. Did something ... different ... happen during Practice League today?”

“Different how?”

“Like, for instance Something happened to Keika——.”

“.....!!”

That seemed to ring a bell because her face, warm from the bath, just froze over.

Then it gets darker like clouds were moving in right before my eyes She forces out a few words.

“..... Keika got a B”

“Say what?!”

A *B*—a demotion warning.

It happens if you go 2-8 or less within a ten-match span.

And if it happens again, going 2-8 in the next ten matches you get demoted.

The B gets removed if you go 3-3, but the rules prevent you from advancing a rank with it still on your record.

Which means Keika is one step away from a demotion, and with her so close to the age limit, getting a B now has to be more painful than I can imagine ...

Now I understand why she doesn't want to see us so much that it hurts.

“..... Keika looked so sad Do you think she's okay?”

“Well pretty much every elite player has had a B at one time or another.”

“Even you, Master?”

“Of course. I had one back in the Sub League You don't forget the pain like that.”

Even the memories still sting. I start reliving every painful detail of those days as they come flooding back into my head.

Sure, the losses hurt, but what hurt the most was feeling like I was getting weaker every day and that my confidence was going down the drain.

I thought I'd hit my limit, like I'd never progress any further my whole life

There was a night it hurt so bad I cried myself to sleep with a Shogi board in my arms.

“It happened right when I was about your age, Ai. I couldn’t win as the upper player without my Lance It threw me into a slump”

“Master had a hard time with a handicap too?!”

“You bet I did. I’d always been in the Static Rook party. That’s why I don’t want you to go through the same pain I did without a Lance.”

I’m worried about Keika, for sure.

But as a Master, the well-being of my apprentice comes first.

And as a pro Shogi player, I can’t ignore my own need to improve.

But most of all If Keika can’t get through this on her own, even if she does make it into the Women’s League, I doubt she’ll be able to survive in the Shogi world.

I gulp down the last bit of milk, put my hand on my apprentice’s head and say, “Let’s give it all we’ve got, Ai.”

“Yes! Master!”

▲ A DETERMINED DRESS-UP DOLL

“Sorry to call you over here like this, Ginko.”

“It’s alright. You said you wanted to talk?”

Two days after I received the B, Ginko and I sit down for a chat in my home’s *tatami* room.

My father my Master is at the association for a match, so it’s just the two of us here now.

Rather than beating around the bush, I get right to the point.

“The other day at the Practice League I got a B.”

“..... Yes.”

She’s not surprised. I bet she already knew.

“I had been winning on and off since getting promoted to C-2, but nothing’s going right these days So, I wanted to talk to you about it. I don’t have much time left——.”

I can stay in the Practice League to become a Women’s League player until my twenty-seventh birthday.

The end of the month: that’s my time limit.

Right now, I’m twenty-five years and seven months old, which means I have less than a year and a half.

The Practice League meets once every two weeks, four matches each time.

That’s 108 matches per year. So, I have about 160 in that year and a half.

Since I’ll get promoted if I win six matches in a row, it looks like I’ve got plenty of chances left.

But I’ve already been in the Practice League for seven years.

I had a chance to go up to C-1. Back when I was twenty-one.

I let that chance go away.

Because of my mistake, my opponent came from behind to win.

“Another chance will come up in no time!”

Back then, I was optimistic about the future.

“I can be in the Women’s League at twenty-two, when my classmates are graduating from university!”

I believed in that possibility.

But rather than looking for another chance, a slump, the likes of which I’ve never had, hit me like a ton of bricks.

I didn’t know how to pull myself back up after falling down. Although I managed to avoid demotion three times, the fourth finally got me.

From C-2 down to D-1—.

“..... I, can’t do this anymore.”

Back then, I was twenty-four.

Long past when I thought I’d be a Women’s League player at twenty-two, the words *age limit* began to feel a lot more real.

At the same time, a little boy I’d once lived with became a Shogi professional in junior high school and a little girl I’d once lived with passed over the Women’s League altogether, claiming titles of her own and climbing toward becoming the first-ever female professional ... getting closer every single day.

I couldn’t move forward no matter what I did. Meanwhile everyone else was leaving the nest, flying off into a bright world. Then my former classmates were all getting jobs, getting married and starting their lives in society.

“Should I quit? But what else would I do?”

By the time I knew what happened, it was too late to turn back.

It felt like I'd been abandoned on a deserted island. Looking up at the sky, I could see Yaichi flying away, bound for someplace off in the distance He stood at the top of the Shogi world.

I fought as hard as I could, but even with all that momentum behind me I turned twenty-five by the time I returned to C-2. I knew this was my last chance, so I put my nose to the grindstone and researched like my life depended on it.

Right along with the best professional Shogi players, I memorized books written on standard strategies and absorbed all the latest styles like a sponge. Every spare moment I had was spent at a Shogi classroom or online playing a match. I kept every single match record and used software to find my best and worst moves.

"I couldn't possibly prepare any more than this! I've studied more Shogi now than I ever have in my life!!"

Yes, I could be proud of how much effort I put into it.

I worked and worked, worked so hard that my whole life revolved around Shogi.

And now—rather than going up, I'm in danger of getting demoted yet again.

"Losing all the time is painful but not being able to progress, no matter how hard I try, is worse. I don't even know what direction I'm going anymore And knowing that I'm not going anywhere makes it feel like what I'm doing is pointless, and I can't focus on studying"

I spit out all the dark, negative thoughts that had built up inside me in one solid stream. Ginko just sat there silently, listening to every word.

But there's something besides *always losing* that's putting more pressure on me.

Ai.

A little girl who caught the Ryuo's attention with her talent. Then she proceeded to go down a path, which took me seven years to travel, in no time at all.

Her being that way, her talent I'm clearly jealous, and that makes me angry.

"What do you think of my playing style? Why do you think I can't win anymore? What do you?" I gulp down the air in my throat as I prepare to expose my darkest, ugliest feelings and say, "What do you think is the difference between Ai and me? I want you to tell me."

"....."

Ginko didn't answer. She just lowered her eyes a little.

That expression tells me a great deal about what she's going to say.

But I'm not mentally strong enough. I need to hear it, loud and clear. Because if I don't I'll start thinking things like, "*Do I even have talent after all?*" I'd get wrapped up in baseless hope. That's why—.

"Tell me. Ginko."

"Keika"

"Say it. And be honest."

"....."

She looks like she's about to cry.

But I think that she's realized I'm not about to change my mind because she looks me straight in the eyes and says, "You're clearly getting weaker."

".....!"

"You already know that, don't you? That your Shogi has no heart. That you play standard and follow the latest trends, but there's nothing beneath the

surface. Rather than thinking for yourself, you depend solely on memorizing what others tell you and fall apart as soon as the match veers away from the standard patterns. That's why no one is scared to play against you at all. There's nothing for you to build on, so you're not improving. You weren't as knowledgeable, but you were much stronger back when you were excited to play when you were twenty."

"....."

I thought I was prepared for that But now I'm the one on the verge of tears.

She nailed me right where it hurts the most. That's what it felt like.

"That pip-squeak doesn't know the first thing about standards. But that's exactly why she thinks through everything herself. That's why each move shines. Every single move she makes becomes experience and that experience builds into strength."

"..... I know that."

"Keika"

"I know. I know I'm just imitating other people when I play Shogi I know my playing style is basically just some dress-up doll"

That's a lie.

I had a feeling, but I've kept looking away from the truth. Saying "*I know*" is a lie.

But if I don't say it like this, my fragile pride would snap and my spirit will be as good as gone.

"In one year no in six months I won't even be in Ai's shadow anymore. I know."

We may both be in the Practice League, but our talent levels are worlds apart.

I can tell by how others react. I can tell how much they expect from Ai Hinatsuru and Ai Yashajin. Even I, with no talent at all, can tell how incredible they both are by looking at their match records.

“But even still, I can win like this. If I can just get a lead in the early game and maintain it without making mistakes, then I can——.”

“No, you can’t.”

“.....!”

“The way you’re playing now, you can’t. Even if you get a lead early on, you’ll get passed by in the late game.”

“Have I gotten”

Have I gotten that weak?

Has Ai gotten that strong?

“So then my Shogi has decayed that far”

“.....”

“Ginko. Can I ask you one more favor?”

“What is it?”

“I would like you to be my practice partner.”

Practice groups are not some club for friends.

They’re relationships between Shogi players built on give and take. If one side comes on too strong, that relationship gets distorted and turns sour. In a pure place like the Shogi world, that kind of relationship won’t last.

But even so, that’s what I’m after right now.

“Please, Ginko. No, Sora-sensei.”

I put my hands on the *tatami* mat and bow my head.

She’s always been like a little sister to me, so this is the first time I’ve ever

called her *Sensei*.

“Just one month is fine. Please give me some of your time for just one month, Sora-sensei. If you agree, I swear I’ll spend the rest of my life finding a way to pay you back——.”

“Stop!”

Ginko cuts me off with tears in her eyes.

“Please stop Why do you have to say it like that? You know I’d do anything for you, Keika! Why did you have to use those words to ask for something I’d do anyway?!”

“..... Thank you, Ginko. I’m sorry”

If I ask like this, there’s no way Ginko would refuse. The whole thing was a dirty trick, a calculated performance that I had planned out ahead of time.

How did I turn out like this?

I thought about the sly, underhanded person I’ve become and lightly grimace at the distance that separates dreams from reality.

Never once in all my life did I dream of becoming a person like this.

RECORD 3

ASUKA OISHI

AGE: 17

HOMETOWN: OSAKA CITY

FAVORITE THINGS: TONPEIYAKI
ARCTIC ICE CANDY

SPECIALTIES: ALL ASPECTS OF BATHHOUSE
MANAGEMENT
S-SHO SH



BATHHOUSE TRAINING

And so, my Ranging Rook training began at the Gokigen Bathhouse.

“Ryuo! Fetch me a half-and-half coffee!”

“Hurry up and teach me something, Ryuo!”

“Yes, on my way! I’d be glad to!”

I received the nickname (?) *Ryuo* from the get-go at the bathhouse and everyone used me as their own personal butler from then on.

All the customers are hardcore Ranging Rook party members, so being a title-holding member of the Static Rook party made me the object of their hate and contempt. They have the home-field advantage ... completely.

Even the Meijin, as great as he is, wasn’t spared their wrath.

“The Demon King stands in the way of our Maestro’s Shogi world domination.”

“A Static Rooker stealin’ Ranging Rook’s latest strategies like some common thief.”

“A brute winning with Ranging Rook better than real Ranging Rook party members.”

They had all sorts of names for him. Kind of like the last boss in a videogame.

At the same time, each and every one of them has been trained by Mr. Oishi, so they’re Ranging Rook party members who I’d love to play against every chance I get. There’s more “worldliness” in this classroom than anywhere else on the planet.

Normally, titleholders wouldn’t be doing instructional lessons like this, but the owner is a titleholder himself and the customers here are diehard Shogi fans. So, playing game after game without any handicap didn’t bother me one bit.

Actually, several of them are good enough to make it to the national tournaments to represent the prefecture and are even better at using Central Rook Left *anaguma* than most pros because that strategy is all the rage among amateurs right now. I'm learning so much.

But above all else, I can tell that playing Ranging Rook really makes them happy, especially Central Rook. They practically glow with every move. They're excited to play ... and it shows. Happy-go-lucky.

Seeing things that I would never have thought of all the time gave me so many new ideas. Most were Ranging Rook, of course, but for some reason I started coming up with new twists on Static Rook strategies as well. I was in the classroom playing Shogi with customers every chance I got. Since I've lost a lot of matches recently, having full weeks off has become the usual and I can work any shifts I want (tear).

"Welcome! Oh, please take off your shoes and put them in the shelf over here."

My post was the attendant's counter on the first floor once the bathhouse was open for business.

Mr. Oishi looks after the boiler room, so he's almost never at the front.

"I'm the only A League professional in the world with a boiler certification."

He loves saying that. I don't know why that matters, but it sounds cool.

But I tell you, the attendant's counter is where it's at.

"Attendant's counter." It's a man's dream come true!

Ever since I was a kid, I've only ever thought about becoming a pro Shogi player. Even still, in an essay back in elementary school called *When I Grow Up* I wrote: "I want to be a Shogi pro when I grow up. Then, I want to be the Meijin someday. But if I can't, I want to work at the attendant's counter in a bathhouse. That way, I can see naked women whenever I want."

Master thought it was fantastic, but Big Sis wouldn't talk to me.

"That dream at last!!"

I cried tears of joy my first day behind that counter. Tears that I didn't even shed the day I turned pro

However, those tears of joy quickly became tears of sorrow.

"..... Master? Did I just see you thinking dirty things while looking at our customers?"

"!! No, not at all Nope."

"..... I have my eyes on you, Master."

... Because my apprentice is constantly watching me.

Ai comes over here as soon as school lets out and works like a machine all over the bathhouse. Then again, what else would I expect from someone who grew up at a hot spring? She's thorough and flawless around the baths. She also helps out in Master Kiyotaki's classroom, so she knows exactly what to do upstairs as well. All while constantly watching me. Scary.

Asuka gets home in the evening, usually wearing her school's gym shirt and shorts, and always has the same sorry look on her face even though she lives here.

"Th-thank you I'll, take over"

"Ah, sure. It's all yours."

"Um You and Ai can take a break I ... made some food, so"

She takes care of household chores immediately when she gets back from high school, and then comes to work in the bathhouse once she's done. Asuka is nothing like the party girls living it up in Umeda ... a genuinely good girl.

"U-Um Sorry but this is all I can make"

I couldn't help but jump for joy as soon as I saw what she put out on the

table.

“Ah! That’s *tonpeiyaki*!”

“*Ton-pei-yaki*?”

Ai tilts her head. She’s probably never heard of that food before.

“Think of it like *okonomiyaki*’s cousin. Fried pork and veggies are all cooked together like a big omelette, but the flavor totally depends on the sauce or adding fish flakes.”

“That kind of food exists?! Osaka is amazing!”

“*Tonpeiyaki* isn’t all over Japan?!”

That news came as quite a shock to Asuka. She’s Osakan, through and through.

My apprentice and I dig into the piping hot *tonpeiyaki* and——.

“Th-this is incredibly delicious?!”

That first-in-her-life flavor came as quite a surprise for Ai.

“It tastes a bit like *okonomiyaki* But the texture isn’t even close! The eggs are light and a little runny, but each bite is so filling This isn’t fair to other foods! It’s the best!”

“You got that right. It’s like an omelette, but there’s more punch to the flavor and it’s so much more satisfying.”

“Fullyful♪”

Well, Ai certainly seems to be a fan.

“Keika’s *okonomiyaki* is delicious, but your *tonpeiyaki* is very, very delicious!!”

“..... Yep.”

Keika’s *okonomiyaki* I could go for some right now

I haven’t spoken to her since that phone call.

Of course, I haven't forgotten about her but considering the reason why she's upset, having me or Ai try to cheer her up would just make her feel worse. There's got to be something I can do for her, but what?

While I'm trying to figure things out on my own, Ai and Asuka seem to be getting along very well.

"Asuka, Asuka! Please teach me how to make *tonpeiyaki*!"

"S-Sure, but Ai, you can cook? In fourth grade?"

"Yep! I'll make some Kanazawa curry for you next time!"

"That sounds delicious"

Good enough to die for (I speak from experience).

"A-Ai You're incredible. You can cook, everything you do at the bathhouse And so good at Shogi"

"No, you're the incredible one, Asuka! Because you can make delicious *tonpeiyaki*!"

"T-This? Anyone can make it"

Asuka mumbles quietly as she looks at the elementary school girl in front of her with envy in her eyes and says, "If I try really hard, do you think I could become something like you, Ai?"

"You've got it backwards! There's so much I need to learn from you, Asuka."

"M-Me? I'm nothing special at all"

"That's not true. If you're nothing special, then my Master, who can only look at customers with lusty eyes, is the really useless one."

Come again? Is Ai angry?

This conversation is going in a very bad direction, so I jump in and change the topic.

“Oh, Asuka, aren’t you in any clubs? Don’t you want to go out with your friends every once in a while?”

“I, um, I I’m not very good with that kind of thing

Asuka’s face turns red the moment I ask as she looks down at the floor.

“W-What I want to do is

“Want to do is?”

“U-Umm want to do is S-Sho Sh

Sh?

“U, Um! It’s, nothing

Asuka scratches her head with both hands, hiding her face behind her bangs.

Training sessions with the Worldly Maestro happened whenever I found time between shifts at the bathhouse and the classroom, as long as the Maestro himself was up for it.

“One at a time is such a hassle. Both of you, come at me at once.”

“Yes!”

“Yes!”

Ai and I lower our heads and challenge Mr. Oishi with our still-budding Ranging Rook skills.

Being double-boarded as a pro is humiliating. Oh, I was pissed, and I was bound and determined to use every bit of Ranging Rook knowledge I’d built up to make him eat those words.

However, I was the one who ended up having to swallow my pride.

“N nothing worked

“Of course not. I’m a Ranging Rook player with nothing to sell but a hot

spring. I can't go losing to some super bathhouse owner All-Rounder who plays Ranging Rook with his head in the clouds."

Not sure what that meant, but it sounded cool.

It didn't matter how much the two of us played against him, side-by-side, on separate boards, at the same time, because I never got any good hits in. He wiped the floor with me during the matches, and thoroughly cleaned my clock during the review sessions.

"Don't depend on the standards! You've got to let the passion in your heart flow out over the board through your fingertips! Goki-Central Rook is all about feeling a jazz rhythm! Don't think it through! Feel it!!"

No luck.

"Stop protecting your Bishop! The Bishop is nothing but dead weight with a target on its back that gets in the way with Ranging Rook! Just give it to your opponent right away!!"

No luck.

"Your attacks are too heavy! Lighter, worldly! So what if you lose pieces! They fall like flies and your formation goes all to hell, it's all about finding a way to get to the other King in the meantime! That's the epitome of worldliness!!"

No luck.

"No fire! Where's your passion?! Your skin should tingle with Ranging Rook, play like it! Why're you training at this bathhouse!!? Go wash up and try again!!"

But even then, no luck.

I'm a pro Shogi player. The man who has become the youngest title holder in history.

I know all the Ranging Rook standard strategies by heart.

But this *worldly sense* is the lifeblood of Ranging Rook and extremely difficult to grasp, so my days of muffled screams of rage kept going

Nothing changed on the way to the weekend, when I decided to spend my time living and working at the bathhouse.

“The most effective way to sharpen your worldly senses is by cleaning!”

“..... Give me a break.”

“None of that backtalk, Yaichi. This is how I got stronger. Mopping a tile floor has a lot in common with swiping a Rook across the board.”

I still think that’s pushing it But the fact remains that this is a valuable opportunity for me to talk with the Maestro.

With all the customers gone and the large tub drained, all of us are scrubbing every surface in sight. Meanwhile, Mr. Oishi and I are doing a boardless, verbal practice session.

We say our moves out loud back and forth for a while before Asuka, who’d been listening in the whole time and finds a break in our conversation to say, “U-Um That’s really impressive”

“Say what?”

“Um Doing Shogi, without seeing the pieces”

“Oh, having a mental Shogi board? It’s not all that special. Ai can do it too.”

“Yees!”

Interjects Ai, while using a mop taller than she is, more efficiently than anyone, without missing a step. She’s in her element: like a fish returned to water.

Asuka looks at Ai with admiration and says, “Um How, do you see it? The, um”

“The mental Shogi board? Well, it varies person to person. Sort of like dreams

showing up in black and white or in color. What does yours look like, Mr. Oishi?”

“Pretty much like an actual board, with some other things in the background too. But parts are a bit blurry. Can’t see the whole thing at once. Yourself?”

“I see in colors too, but I don’t see the pieces. Just their names written in black. I can see the whole board at first, but I lose about forty percent once the battles start happening and back and forth from there.”

I’ve also asked Big Sis about this, so I know what kind of board appears inside Naniwa’s Snow White’s head.

“It’s a fuzzy black with all the pieces black and blurry, and everything moves around really fast.”

Or so she claims. Kind of scary.

“W-What about, you Ai?”

“Mine Hmm It’s the same as a Shogi puzzle. Just the lines and characters, all in black and white. Everything’s pretty clear too. It’s small, but I can see it all.”

“That makes sense since you learned how to play with Shogi puzzles.”

Mr. Oishi proposes a theory. “That being the case, it sounds like your mental image is whatever kind of board you’ve seen the most.”

So then, what’s the black, blurry thing that Big Sis has in her head?

“W-Well, it’s not like what you see in your head has any relation to your Shogi skills. Doesn’t matter if it cost an arm and a leg or it’s just lines on paper: a Shogi board is a Shogi board. Everyone has one board in their head that they can——.”

“Just one? I see six.”

All three of us freeze and look at Ai in stunned amazement.

“The puzzle ones and Master’s eight-and-a-half-inch one we use for practice is there too. Also, two boards from the association’s classroom are side by side and the smartphone one *in my pocket* shows up too Ah! And my tablet one! So, altogether that would be” Ai counts on her fingers while saying, “Six in black and white, the tablet, the smartphone, Master’s big one, the two at the association So, eleven in all!”

“Elev ...”

She’s got eleven in there?

“A and you see them all at once?”

Mr. Oishi’s stuttering voice sounds exactly like his daughter’s.

“All eleven at once is pretty hard. I have to *move between them*”

After a few more questions, we found out that for Ai—the boards with color are in *a separate room* from the black and white ones, but she can go back and forth between the two rooms whenever she wants and the smartphone is always in her pocket, apparently.

How she has a pocket is beyond me

“But the black and white ones all show up together. Isn’t it like that for everybody?”

No. No it’s not.

Mr. Oishi, Asuka and I all silently take a dig at her. None of us was really sure if it was okay to say these things out loud.

“Alright Should we try an experiment?”

“S-Sounds good to me”

Mr. Oishi and I each line up three boards, put on blindfolds along with Ai to make her play six games at once.

The two of us only have one mental board to work with.

However, as long as we follow the standards we've memorized to the letter, it's possible to play blind like this.

Then again, forcing the brain to remember what's happening on two more boards at the same time is a lot of work. Probably the same as someone without a mental Shogi board trying to play blind.

Even so

"Okay, on board one 1 Two Lance, on the second 6 Eight Gold advances and on the third, 3 Six Rook Should be right, yes? I'm not violating any rules, am I?"

"For mine, um The first is 5 Five Pawn. T-The second 5 One Rook. Th-third how about 6 One Pawn for the third?!"

"For Master's first, 6 Eight Silver, second 7 Three Silver and 4 Two Gold on the third. For Oishi-sensei, take it with the Pawn on the first take and promote the Rook on the second, but on the third I think your Pawn count is off. There are two Pawns in the same column."

"....."

Here we are, two pro players tripping over ourselves through the mid and late games while Ai is easily tracking all six matches like it was a walk in the park. She doesn't sound tired at all. It's like she's been looking at physical boards the whole time.

Floored by each and every turn, Mr. Oishi whispers into my ear, "..... Hey, Yaichi. Isn't this young lady a bit scary?"

"..... I'm remembering just how much right now"

My apprentice might become far more than I ever thought possible.

So much more than I thought Much much more

"..... So jealous"

Those words leaked out from somewhere and echo off the walls for what felt like an eternity.

▲ SHOGI MARTIANS

“Mental Shogi board?”

“Yes. How do you see it, Keika?”

I close my eyes and really concentrate on it when Ginko asked me.

“..... It’s out of focus, but I can see the board. It gets a little foggy with every move though”

“That’s pretty much how it goes. Mine looks the same way.”

This is my home—the kids’ room on the second floor of the Kiyotaki household.

The very room that Yaichi and Ginko once shared and where Ai sleeps when she spends the night. Now it’s Ginko’s again because she’s staying here to teach me.

“Your mental Shogi board clarity is a benchmark of how thoroughly you’ve read the board up to that point. It’s also a good indication of talent.”

“Really? I’ve heard that plenty of strong players’ mental boards are murky at best”

“Their skills may be equal, but their perception is on a different level. In sports terms, a player might score points left and right while their form and style make no sense. At the same time, another player is racking up points too, but their form is solid as a rock. The stats are similar, but you can tell one has so much more potential than the other, yes? The same thing happens in Shogi.”

Ginko unloads all of that once before ... *sigh* and then continues.

“..... There are times I think men and women have a different perception even when evenly matched.”

“Perception?”

“It’s hard to explain but going against them, the way they move feels like they’re playing a different game. Like they saw this exact situation coming a long time ago, think *here!* Then they stop defensively biding their time and switch to a speedy, all-out offensive. Women’s League players don’t read all that far ahead and just play with their gut. That never happens in the Sub League.”

At this very moment, Ginko is one of only a handful of women in the Sub League.

She’s the only one with a *dan* ranking.

And she’s claiming that of the people at her level, men have a different perception.

In other words: talent.

“Sub League members at 2-*dan* and 3-*dan* probably aren’t seeing what we are.”

“They aren’t? What’s different?”

“They see how the pieces move.”

“I’m pretty sure anyone can”

“We look at where the pieces are and read the board to see what they can do. But the young men in the pros and upper ranks of the Sub League can do that without reading the board. *They perceive what the pieces can do.*”

“..... I’m sorry, Ginko. But, I can’t understand what you’re saying——.”

“They’re all Shogi Martians.”

“???”

“We’re earthlings. We can only think through what we see with our eyes. But them, they see more than what’s on the board. They have a completely different sense. That’s why their reading speed and depth is so much different

..... It might be better to say *they're not even reading. They know just by looking.*"

"....."

A chill runs down my spine.

I thought Ginko might need to lay down for a while at first. People in the Sub League play as if their lives depended on it, and that level of stress can take its toll. Many people drop out because of it.

But the more I thought about it, the more the things she said began to line up and a new kind of fear began to sink in.

If everything she said thus far is true, then?

Hypothetically, if it's not a matter of skill and experience ...

But a *whole different species*?

If so——did I ever have a chance to catch up in the first place?

"Including myself, there are no female players who *can see* Rina Shakando attacks with finesse and advances with crushing counterattacks but I don't feel any difference in her perception. Machi is the same type. Ryou Tsukiyomizaka brags about her speed, but speed will never beat me, so she doesn't count."

All those names she just dropped, it's overwhelming. I'm speechless.

The Eternal Queen: Rina Shakando, Women's Legend.

Machi the Tormentor: Machi Kugui, Yamashiro Ouka.

Aggressive Archangel: Ryou Tsukiyomizaka, Women's King.

All three of them hold titles right now and each one could be considered in the discussion to determine the strongest Women's League player ever.

The other thing they all have in common is that none of them has ever beaten Ginko, not once.

“But there’s something different about Ika Sainokami. She might be able to see. Then there’s”

“..... Ai. Am I right?”

“.....”

She didn’t say a word. But that’s as good as a yes for Ginko.

Worldly Thunder Ika Sainokami also holds the Women’s Emperor title. She’s so good she defeated a pro player in a televised speed match. Although still in high school, word is she may be even more talented than Ginko.

She’s talented enough to be on par with that prodigy.

Does she really have much? Is Ai that gifted?

“Anyway, we’re not like the Shogi Martians. That’s why we shouldn’t try to copy their research and study methods,” Ginko says with a shrug.

“Their latest findings will end up hurting us. No matter how recent or advantageous that information is supposed to be, it’s no better than a bad move if you can’t pull it off in a match, yes?”

“..... For you too, Ginko?”

“Naturally. I’m not one of them.”

“Aren’t you being a little too modest? You’re only fourteen, but already a member of the Sub League with 2-*dan*. You should be just as talented as they are.”

“I’m an earthling raised by Shogi Martians. I can speak their language, but I don’t have what they were born with.”

“But, these Shogi Martians? You’ve beaten them before.”

“I share some tendencies with pro players and quite a few veterans. They like heavy offensives and strong counterattacks just like me And they use that strategy to defeat newer players. I use them as a reference.”

“So, you’re winning with experience?”

“That and research. Without research, winning is impossible.”

Huh? Didn’t she just say?

“I thought you said research was unusable?”

“Research that others do, yes. What I’m talking about is my own results. Rather than depending on what others have found, I research my opponents myself. It’s good training as well.”

“Researching opponents ... yourself”

“Shogi Martians attack using their perception, but that makes them easier to set up for traps because they depend on their senses so much. They’re arrogant too. There’s the attack window.”

“So, get ahead in the early game and defend until they can be overwhelmed?”

“Close, but defending is dangerous Ideally, you never want to give them a chance to attack from the beginning. There’s a lot less pressure that way too.”

“I agree that if I could do it that way, that would be ideal but”

In other words, don’t let your opponent do anything. Crush them under an all-out attack. Am I capable of pulling that off?

“So? What should I do?”

“Get experience first. I think simulating Practice League conditions would be best. Ten-second Shogi is great for honing your senses. But you want to get in the habit of using your waiting time. That’s important.”

“That makes sense”

For the most part, I’ve focused mainly on playing as much as possible in a short amount of time with versus matches and playing on the Internet.

But that was all wrong.

“While it’s important to save some time for the late game, it’s even more important to practice *using every second of it*. If you’ve got nothing to think about to begin with, that time will be wasted anyway. Just get in the habit of thinking. It doesn’t matter when.”

“Think Okay. I understand.”

“Then, of course playing through your opponent’s match records would be good, but I think playing through higher ranking players who share your playing style would also help. It’ll give you some things to think about.”

“What about Shogi puzzles? If I solve the difficult ones like Ai does, then I’ll be stronger in the late game——.”

“Solving puzzles is fine. However, longer puzzle patterns never show up in real matches, so just do the shorter ones over and over. Spending all that time on something you’ll never see in a match is a waste.”

“.....”

“Do a few five-step checkmate Shogi puzzles at the very end, when your brain is tired after a day of researching. I think that’ll be enough practice for the late game.”

My practice methods were being shot down one after another.

Which means all the time that I’ve spent doing them was *wasted*, and pretty much negated everything I’ve done in my life thus far. What’s worse, everything she’s saying makes sense.

However——.

“May I ask, just one thing?”

“What?”

“Both you and Yaichi started taking Shogi seriously at the same time and have had basically the same kind of training since then, yes? The two of you have been in the same environment and have played against each other more than

anyone in the world Weren't you better than him at the start?"

"That's true."

"So then, why?"

Why—is there such a gap between you two? How did it happen?

There are some people who can work as hard as they can, work just as hard as anyone else, but never get rewarded for it. I wanted her to tell me why that happens.

And even if I'm one of the ones who never gets to reap what they sow, to never know the reason why That's just too cruel.

"..... Yaichi was the fourth fastest person in history to turn pro. He was also the first junior high school student to participate in the current Sub League 3-*dan* division. Then he became the youngest ever to claim a title. To be Ryuo"

"....."

"Yaichi's fingers are already woven into Shogi history. Without a doubt, he has that much talent. He's the prince of planet Shogi. That's Yaichi Kuzuryu-*ryuo*. My younger brother apprentice."

Talent. In the end, that's what it all comes down to.

She already figured that out? Knew that some get rewarded while others don't?

"I might be the best female Shogi player. But, even if that were true I'm not even in the top 1,000 when men are considered. My talent doesn't measure up."

There was no modesty or exaggeration in her words. Ginko sounds absolutely sure of herself.

She's still just a fourteen-year-old girl.

Normally believing that there's a chance they could be a princess, or believing that they are extremely talented girls at that age still have those dreams.

At least when I was that age, I had so much baseless confidence and saw the future as a bright place of opportunity.

But this girl, after all the effort she's put in, arrived at the conclusion that she had *no talent*. A truly depressing, hopeless answer, but she's accepted it.

Accepted it, gone through that despair and is still fighting on.

How are you that strong? I was just about to ask. How did you get that strong?

"..... The planet that Shogi Martians call home is far away, and the air is toxic to earthlings. One of us would die if we went. But still——."

Ginko looks up at the stars twinkling outside the window and says just above a whisper, "I want to go there."

"Why?"

"..... Because it's irritating."

——Isn't there actually another reason?

——Don't you actually want to be with a special someone, stand in the same place and see what they see?

I was about to say it out loud but swallowed my words.

Just seeing the look of longing on her face, in profile, the admiration in her eyes as she looked up at the stars in the night sky I didn't have to ask.

AGE LIMIT

“No practice groups, sessions or anything with you, today.”

Sunday morning. I spent the night here with my apprentice on our day off, working our fingers to the bone for a chance to have a practice session, so this came as a shock.

“W-Why not?! No! D-Don’t tell me It’s because you found out I’ve been secretly drinking milk on the job and taking the almost-used-up bars of soap home with me!?”

“Oh, have you now? I’ll be taking that out of your paycheck now by the way.”
I’m not getting paid.

“But really, why? Do you have some other plan? Visiting Asuka’s school or something like that?”

“A practice session, if you must know.”

“Come again? What? Seriously?! A practice session?!”

“Yeah. With a Sub Leaguer.”

“With someone in Sub League?!”

“You don’t need to act so surprised.”

“But, wait Mr. Oishi, you never do practice sessions”

“Sure, I said stuck-up things like that all the time when I was younger. *What good could come from pros swapping information? A pro worthy of the name does his own research.* Or something like that. Pff Ah, youth.”

“Hold up, hold up! If you’re open to that, let me have some practice sessions without all this extra work!”

“Those young’uns have such flexible imaginations. Makes for a nice jolt to my

system.”

“..... So, you’re saying the Ryuo’s imagination doesn’t give you that jolt?”

The Maestro didn’t say anything, only chuckled through his nose. Damn

“The one I’m practicing with, they’re one heck of a researcher. Even I’m impressed and a little stunned.”

“T-That much?”

Is there anyone in the Kansai Sub League that Mr. Oishi would think so highly of? Since he’s taking his own time to do a practice session, could it be someone from Kanto?

Just like how the anti-Goki Central strategy Extreme Speed! ♣ 3 Seven Silver originally came out of the Sub League, times have changed to the point that pros are too scared to play Shogi without keeping tabs on the Sub League. Even the lone wolf of the Shogi world, the Worldly Maestro, has had to adapt

“So yeah, I’m not playing you today. We’ll be over at the main building, so the two of you have the bathhouse and the classroom all to yourselves. Sorry, but try to keep things running on your own.”

So, that’s how today turned into my first lesson with my apprentice in a while but——.

“We’re heeere!”

Four elementary school girls are standing in line just inside the doorway, holding their own bags.

The always energetic Mio Mizukoshi (4th grade).

The very ladylike Ayano Sadatou (4th grade).

My first apprentice, Ai Hinatsuru (4th grade).

And the blonde angel, Charlette Isoir (1st grade).

“Welcome, everyone. Want to go to the baths first? Or play Shogi?”

“Shogi!!”

The happy, bubbling voices greet me as I step out front. They love Shogi.

“You know? This is Cha’s fwirst big bath?!”

Little Charlette is so excited her cheeks are turning pink even before getting in the bath. That level of cuteness can make a guy’s head spin.

Ai starts explaining everything like a seasoned veteran as I take everyone up to the second floor.

“All of the customers here play Ranging Rook!”

“It’s true! And pretty much everyone uses Central Rook!”

Ayano’s big eyes are sparkling under her glasses. Ranging Rook party, through and through.

“Central Rook? Then Mio, let’s try out that Central Rook *anaguma* we’ve been practicing!”

The little All-Rounder Mio starts rolling up her sleeves.

She’s certainly her usual self but *anaguma*?

“You’ve been practicing *anaguma*, Mio? That’s new. I thought you and my apprentice liked not worrying about formations, hitting early and often.”

“Oh, I do. Attacking is so much fun, but I’m having a hard time in the Practice League right now I can’t always attack, so I thought it’d be a good idea to learn how to play defense!”

“Ahhh I hear that.”

A Practice League member and the Ryuo share the same problem. I hear that

“Changing up environments might be just what you need to try out a new

strategy. Alright, let's do this!"

I make a Match Card for all of them and set the girls loose in the classroom.

Except for Charlette, all of the grade schoolers are part of Kansai's Practice League. The customers here are all pretty good, but they hold their own. Actually, they look like they're having even more fun than the customers.

The one standing out the most is—.

"I knew you'd do well today, Ayano. Those were some worldly moves right there, and great form."

"T-That was nothing special! I'm not all that good"

"Give yourself more credit; that was impressive. You've got a better feel for it than I do."

"Th Thanks ... Thank you so much ≡"

She's being modest, but the corners of her mouth are curling up. She's failing to control it, but it's so cute watching her try. My face relaxes too, without even realizing it.

"..... *Darabuchi*."

My face snaps back into place once I hear my apprentice's voice coming from somewhere.

"Alright, now! Who thinks they've got what it takes to take on my Central Rook *anaguma*?!"

Mio fires herself up, actively seeking out another opponent to try the latest trending strategy.

I swear, this girl is always a beaming ball of energy.

The four elementary school girls have very different personalities, but they all get along so well because Mio is at the center of their group. It's also thanks to her that Ai adjusted to Osaka so quickly.

If she's in a slump, I'd like to do what I can to help her out I should probably be more worried about myself first, though.

Mio is now going head-to-head with Charlette—this level of cuteness shouldn't be humanly possible.

The little blonde girl grabs the Rook with her tiny little hand and snaps it down in front of her King with an adorable grin on her face and says, "Centwal Wook."

"No, it's Central Rook."

"Centwaaal Woook."

Charlette is smiling and trying so hard, but her tongue just doesn't want to work that way. Mio points at her own lips and blasts out the sounds, trying to teach her the correct pronunciation, "Not *Wook*, it's *Rook*. Cen-tral R-oo-k!"

"Cwentwral Wock?"

"CEN! TRAL! ROO! K!!"

"Centwal Wook."

"Yep! That'll work!"

"Wook≡"

I'm so at peace right now; it's not even funny.

Several hours later.

"Haaaa That was fun, wasn't it!"

"I've had enough Central Rook for one day"

"All of you did great today. Tell you what, I'll let you in the bath early!"

"Yay! Bath time!"

The grade schoolers jump for joy. The bathhouse isn't open for business yet,

so it's all ours. For a little while, anyway.

Asuka, who was busy getting everything ready, turned bright red as she talked to the girls for the first time. She greeted them with open arms and led them inside.

"Now then I suppose I should take a dip now too."

I go into the men's changing room and start unbuttoning my shirt when——.

Tap, tap, tap.

The cutest footsteps I've ever heard come in the room behind me.

"Masta≡"

"Hm? Is something wrong, Charlette? This is the men's side. You need to go to the room on the opposite end."

"You know, Cha?"

The angel pulls at my pant leg.

"Cha, wants to bwathe with Masta."

..... Huh?

"Charlette, did you just say you want to bathe with me?"

"In the twub."

"Um, yeah. That's not okay."

I smile and turn her down, but she really doesn't seem to understand. It's written all over her face.

"Why? Cha's gonna be Masta's bwide?"

"W-Well yeah, but there's a bit more to it."

Back when I refused to take her as my apprentice, I went into my bag of tricks and pulled out the *I'll make you my bride* trick, so she wouldn't get upset.

Of course, it was just a joke, but the pure and innocent Charlette must've

taken me seriously. And now she's How do I put it Wanting to act like a couple?

Well, now that I think about it I see young girls, like preschool age, go into the men's side with their fathers all the time

"Hmmm A six-year-old Six First grader"

Thinking time.

"..... Right on the edge, yeah?"

While her age is what it is, she is smaller than most kids her age and it'd be dangerous for a little girl from France, unfamiliar with Japanese-style bathhouses like Charlette, to go in without proper supervision, so it'd be safer for her if she was with me——.

"No, no, no! Absolutely not! It's definitely not okay!!"

What the hell was that logic just now?! It doesn't matter if she's a six-year-old from France, there's no way her going in with me would ever be allowed——.

"Awhh, hey! Charlette, no fair!"

Mio, wearing just a T-shirt and panties, bursts into the men's changing room before looking back over her shoulder and yelling toward the girls coming in after her.

"If you're going in, then I want to go with Kujuryu-sensei too. Yeah, Ayano!"

"I, I, um will go along with everyone else"

Ayano's face goes completely red, quietly mumbling under her breath. Taking off her glasses, she looks down at the floor and starts stealing glances in my direction.

Looks kind of like something a grown-up would do if you ask me Hold it, Ryuo. Get a hold of yourself. She's a fourth grader, an elementary school girl in the fourth grade

I grimace and try to laugh it off, but the girls keep upping the ante.

“Okay, let’s vote on it! All those who want to take a bath with Kujuryu-*sensei*, raise your hands! Meee!!”

“Cha, with Masta!”

“..... e too.”

“It-It’s the apprentice’s job to wash their Master’s back! I have to go; it’s my duty!!”

Charlette has both hands high in the air while Ayano is staring at the floor, blushing like mad and lifting her hand just a tiny little bit. Then there’s Ai, throwing her hand into the air as she spouts one reason or another with a very determined look on her face.

The vote was unanimous.

“Hold up, hold up! Just hang on a sec! You know it’s not allowed, right?!”

“Huuuh? Why?”

Mio snaps back, frustrated. The other girls are too, but that’s pure disappointment on her face.

“W-Why? All of you are already in elementary school”

Desperately searching for answers, I glance around the room and happen to catch a glimpse of Asuka at the attendant’s counter. That’s it, she can provide the defense I need!

More specifically, the *law*.

“A Asuka! Asuuukaaa!!”

I call out for help from the one who lays down the law. I need her to come to the rescue now while I can still think straight!

“Asuka! There’s a law that keeps elementary schoolers on their own side, right?! There’s an age limit?! A law that’s set in stone, yes?!”

“U ... um There isn’t

“Come again?”

“There is no clause pertaining to an age limit in the public bathhouse regulations In general, bathhouses create and follow their own guidelines

She’s still red as ever, but she’s speaking more fluidly than I’ve ever heard.

“The *Regulations for Public Bathhouse Arrangement and Sanitation* in Tokyo clearly state in Section 3, Part 11 that *individuals over ten shall not bathe with the opposite gender*. Kyoto sets the age limit at six, Shiga at seven, and other areas have their own rules but Osaka does not

“What? There’s, no age limit? Really

“Y-Yes. There is no established rule for an age limit in Osaka

Seriously?! Osaka, what is wrong with you?!

“B-But, there is one guideline The city’s Department of Health and Sanitation does advise that *Persons over the age of ten should avoid bathing with the opposite gender*

“Then what’s the problem? Charlette is six, and the rest of us are still nine! Yaay!!”

“Yaaay!!”

The girls do a happy dance, hands waving in the air then start stripping. Hey, hey, hey, HEEEEYYYY!!

“Wait, wait, stop! This isn’t right! You shouldn’t be getting naked in front of a man——!”

It came to me just as the words were coming out of my mouth.

If I look away right now would that mean I see these elementary school girls in *that* way, like some kind of pervert? Wouldn’t the more mature, manly

thing to do be not worry about being naked and just go along with it?

Hell no! That'd be even more illegal than jumping in the bath with adult women, for sure!!

"Asuka, are you sure there's nothing?! I ... I'm not going to be arrested, am I?!"

"I'm sure And, um families, as a group may go in together at, um, *family baths*, smaller ones set aside from the main area, but"

"Say what?! Does that mean I could have gone in to one of those with Keika while we were still living in the same house?!"

"Y-Yes"

"Even now?! It'd be legal for me at sixteen and her at twenty-five?!"

"Y-Yes"

"Holy?!! Why did I ever move out of Master's place?!!"

"To have me as your apprentice, right?" Ai says with a grin and a strong grip on my arm.

She's smiling, but there's something scary about it.

"Hey! Ai! Why are you hogging Kujuryu-sensei all to yourself?!"

"I-I'm not hogging!"

"I want to wash Kujuryu-sensei's back! Ayano does too?! Scrub it nice and clean! As our way of saying thank you for everything he's done!"

"I-I um I'd be willing to wash more, as long as it's Kuzuryu-sensei"

Is it just me or is Ayano fretting a little bit?

While all that was going on, Charlette makes her way over to Asuka, lightly tugs at her shorts and says, "You know, you know? Cha's his bwide, so no pwablem!"

“O-Oh but, there may be a problem with a six-year-old wife”

Charlette tilts her head to the side like Asuka just gave her a brainteaser.

..... When the dust settles, the law may say one thing but if rumors like *The Ryuo gathers his apprentice and her friends at a bathhouse claiming it's a practice session and bathes with them* start spreading, the Shogi world will end. It's the obvious conclusion, so I took my bath alone.

▲ CONFESSION

“Whew That was too close”

I dump a bucket of water over my head and take a seat on one of the plastic chairs in the men’s bath to wash myself.

Whenever I take a shower, I always start with the shampoo.

I do that because there’s so many nutrients in both shampoo and conditioner that my face will break out with zits if any of that stuff is left on my skin.

As a titleholder, I serve as the face of the Shogi world and must keep a clean appearance. I consider myself a detail-oriented Ryuo, so I have to think about these things too.

“But really that was almost life-and-death right there”

Everything that just happened replayed in my head while I gave my hair a thorough scrub.

Charlette never really accepted my reasoning while Mio and Ai stubbornly insisted on joining me on the men’s side and wouldn’t take no for an answer.

But Ayano was the icing on the cake.

“Our right to go into the men’s bath is protected by law!”

This girl who had no idea what she was talking about brought politics into it, and for a moment there, it really felt like I had no choice but to let them come in with me.

“I had no idea the always levelheaded Ayano could get that passionate I guess the bathhouse and playing Ranging Rook must’ve really stoked her fire”

“P Probably”

“But, yeah, there’s no way elementary school girls would be allowed on the men’s side, right? A fourth grader doing that would cause an uproar, and of course a first grader is out of the question.”

“Y-Yes Elementary schoolers mature so quickly these days

“Oh yeah they do.”

“S ... Should I turn on the s-shower for you?”

“Ah, please.”

Just as the hot water was flowing through my soapy hair, it hit me. Why was it that I was having a conversation in the men’s bath when I should be the only one in here.

I slowly turn around.

There stands Asuka, wearing her gym shorts and holding the showerhead over me.

“Is is something wrong? Is the water too hot?”

“..... Come again? Nah, the water is perfect but A-Asuka? Huh? Why are you here?”

“U-Um I, uh

“Replacing a showerhead?”

“N-No I’m not

She denies my suggestion, then fills up the bucket beside her with hot water, dunks in a sponge and starts building up a lather with body soap.

“U-Um I’ll, wash your back for you Okay?”

“???”

Why would she do that for me?

“Asuka, why would you do that for me?”

I say the first words that popped into my head. Confusion has a way of making people be blunt.

“.....!”

Asuka wrings out the soapy sponge, looks down at the floor and says with a bright red face, “U-Umm Uh M-My mother”

“Your mother?”

“Told me that when asking men f-for something they’ll listen to whatever you say if you’re in a bath, t-t-together”

Lady, what the heck are you teaching your daughter?

“I Ryu, Ryu, Ryu”

“Ryu?”

“Ryu, Ryu, Ryuo Um, I, uhh”

She pauses for a moment. “Suuu Haaa,” and takes a deep breath. “Ryu, Ryu, Ryu”

That didn’t help anything!

“Ryu Ryuo, I have a request.”

“Request?”

I ask, but I actually already knew.

The intense way she always looks at me.

She always had this look on her face like she wants to say something ever since the first time I came to this bathhouse.

It didn’t matter if I was at the attendant’s counter or giving an instructional lesson at the classroom, I always felt her eyes on me. All the while she thought that burning flame tugging at her heart strings was her little secret!

Hmmm, now what to do?

Asuka is a cute girl, but at the end of the day I've got Keika. What's more, do I have time to be dating anyone when I'm in the middle of Shogi training? On top of that, I've got a live-in apprentice. It's bad enough just being called the *Loli King*. It'd be a real pain if people started calling me the *Playboy King*, too. It'd be hard being a lady's man. They have a lot on their minds. Do I really want to deal with that?

"P-Please teach me!!"

Teach what? Asking would be a bit rude though.

Because of course, she wants me to teach her the game of love!

Fully prepared for Asuka to ask me out on a date, I look up at her beet red face as she keeps squeezing the daylights out of that sponge and says more clearly than anything I've ever heard her say in my life, "Please teach me how to play Shogi!!"

I truly hated Shogi for the first time in my life that day.

CAT HAIR

“..... Shogi, huh”

Sitting in a chair in front of a fan in the empty lobby, I stare at the floor with a towel draped over my head like a defeated boxer.

Asuka ran away immediately after that. She was probably embarrassed. Heck, I was embarrassed, too.

I would've given an arm and a leg to shrivel up into a pile of white ash right then and there Then ...

“Master? Did something happen?”

My apprentice's voice comes down from above like she's leaning in over me. Whoa!!

“A-Ai?! It-It's nothing?! Really, nothing happened?!”

“Uwhh? Nothing what?”

Ai curiously stares at me as I nearly jump out of my chair. This girl seems to have a sixth sense that tells her when I'm lying or trying to hide something, but since there really is nothing at all this time, that sense doesn't seem to be working. Not sure if I should be happy or sad about it

“So Is everyone done?”

“Just me. I got out early just so I could play Shogi with you, Master!”

Her face is still pink from the bath; Ai probably felt like drying her hair would be a waste of time and starts carrying a Shogi board over to me. We always play a match after one of the grade schooler practice sessions. Seeing me play Shogi with other people makes her want to play against me even more. Adorable.

“..... Sure, a desire to play Shogi is important.”

“Hee-hee≡”

“But you’ve got to make sure your hair is dry. You might catch a cold ... and dripping water onto your opponent is disrespectful.”

“Ah Y-Yes. I’m sorry”

“Hold on a second.”

I go grab a brush and hairdryer from beneath the attendant’s counter and put a chair down in front of where I was sitting. Patting the seat, I say, “Sit down. I’ll dry your hair for you.”

“Wha?! You’ll blow-dry my hair, M-Master?”

“Just something special for today. This is our secret, okay?”

If the other girls found out, they’d be saying *Me too!!* all afternoon. Mio’s hair is short, but everyone else’s would take a long, long time.

“I-I I’m not worthy of such an honor, but please go ahead!”

Saying something I never thought I’d hear a kid say, Ai sits down with her back toward me.

First, I get some of the water out with a towel, then turn on the hairdryer and set to work.

“Uwahh That feels nice≡”

“Ohh I see now. You’ve got fine hair that lays flat by itself. Just like a cat.”

“I’ve got kitty hair, meow♪”

My happily content apprentice swings her legs back and forth, meowing.

“Meow, meow, meow≡”

Ah So cute.

My apprentice is seriously adorable. It’s scary how cute she is.

“Master, you’re really good with a dryer.”

“I am?”

“You could open your own hair-drying salon!”

“Well, maybe I’ll open one when I retire from Shogi

This pointless banter is doing wonders for my wounded heart, still hurting from the unluckiest misunderstanding ever.

“So, tell me, young lady, is your scalp itchy at all?”

“Not at all, meow! You’re amazing with a hair dryer, Master! Perfect!!”

“Really? I wouldn’t know myself, but I guess it’s because I’ve been doing this for a long time.”

“..... For a long time?”

“Since I was a live-in apprentice. Drying Big Sis’s hair was my job.”

“..... Uh-huh.”

“She was a lot like you, saying things like *If I have less time to dry my hair, I would like to play Shogi!* and stuff like that. Unfortunately, she didn’t have much of an immune system and would catch a cold right away if her hair was wet. Which is why Keika made it my job to dry it for her.”

“..... Uhh.”

“Wow, that takes me back

Big Sis has cat-like hair too. And that color, yeah? It was the strangest thing to me back then. I asked her *Are your nose hairs that color too?* and she smacked me upside the head

Big Sis used to go to Keika for anything and everything, but for some reason I was the one who had to dry her hair. Bet she thought it was a job fit for a slave.”

“..... Ah-huh.”

“Big Sis used to treat me so bad that Keika offered to dry my hair

But I hated the idea. Looking back on it, I can’t believe I wasted such a great opportunity. Boys that age, see, they don’t like women having hands all over

them. It's embarrassing, yeah? I bet there are boys who pick on girls in your class, right Ai? That actually means they like them."

"....."

"Still, I was just a kid back then. She was like an older sister, but too bright and dazzling"

"....."

"At the same time, Big Sis clung to Keika from the start. She had this magnetic Shogi set that she carried around with her and followed Keika wherever she went."

I kept talking, running my fingers through my apprentice's hair as sepia-filtered memories came flooding back.

"But, Keika——."

■ KEIKA'S MEMORIES

"This girl is livin' with us startin' today."

I thought he was joking when I heard father say that.

"..... Ginko. Ginko, Sora."

This little four-year-old girl with silver hair, ash-colored eyes and no blood relation whatsoever said her name as if issuing a challenge.

Rather than a doll or stuffed animal, she carried a magnetic Shogi board around with her at all times. I hated her from the moment we first met.

My mother passed away when I was very young, so my memories of her were pretty dim when I was a first-year student in high school. It was also around the one-year anniversary of my grandmother's death. She was my father's mother and had lived with us, so it was just father and me living at home back then.

I'd finally gotten used to working at the Shogi classroom and doing chores around the house in addition to school club activities, and now here was this *live-in apprentice* that I had no say in whatsoever.

"This can't actually be happening, right?"

Of course, I was dead set against it, but father insisted.

"Take care 'o her, ya hear?"

So, it became my job to look after her when they weren't playing Shogi.

"Ginko. This here's my daughter, Keika. Think of her like yar real big sister an' play nice, a'right?"

"..... Keika?"

"*Kei* from *keima*, the Knight, and *ka* is the same character used for *kyosha*, the Lance. So, Keika."

“..... Keika.”

The silver-haired girl looked up at me, my reflection in those ash-colored eyes trying to provoke me with a glare From that day on, she followed me around, everywhere, with that magnetic Shogi board in her hands.

..... Years later, I asked my father why he took Ginko in, and he laughed, “Thought ya were lonely

I’m grateful he did take her in now, but back then, I hated Ginko with a passion. Annoyingly so.

Two weeks later, my father came home with another child after serving as a judge in a Shogi tournament.

“My name is Yaichi Kuzuryu! Nice to meet you!”

This time it was a six-year-old boy, but this one I didn’t have the same reaction to Yaichi that I did to Ginko.

Yaichi acted his age, so full of energy and always had something to talk about. Part of it could have been that communicating with him was so easy But I think my problem with Ginko might have been that she was a girl, and it felt like father had found my “replacement.”

I, a high schooler, could very well have been jealous of that four-year-old girl.

I mean, at four years old, she’s younger than I was when my father first taught me Shogi’s rules. I struggled just to remember how each piece moved, but this girl had already mastered the rules by the time she was two. She was holding her ground against adults as a four year old.

A prodigy.

Part of me realized that she was one. After all, my father is a Shogi prodigy as well.

And prodigies like them can never understand how average people feel.

“I’ll be teachin’ ya Shogi startin’ today. Call me *Master* durin’ lessons.”

Father said that to me on my first day of elementary school.

There was something different in his voice that day, something about his demeanor that told me I didn’t have the right to say *no*.

Most likely, father wanted to pass down a skill to help his daughter survive as quickly as possible now that my mother was no longer with us.

My father, being who he is, only had the skill of Shogi.

“Why can’t ya see such a simple move?! ... I just taught ya that standard formation, don’ tell me ya already forgot?!”

His lessons were strict, and I didn’t improve the way he hoped I would.

The more he drilled into my head, the more I hated Shogi. And no amount of repetition will help when you hate what you’re doing. Lesson after lesson every day, and I came to hate Shogi even more with each one.

My feelings must’ve come across. One day, father sat me down and said, “If ya wanna quit, quit. Make yar own decision.”

I chose to quit. I was so, so happy that I never had to touch a Shogi board again.

While I didn’t play Shogi myself, I was never shut off from it completely.

That was for the simple reason that we ran a Shogi classroom out of our house, and I helped father do it. He was a single father, so I thought it was only natural for me to do things around the house, and I got an allowance as well.

I hated Shogi, but sometimes I would play casual matches against some of our customers. We never told them that father used to work with me one-on-one,

and I pretended to be a novice who only understood the rules. Neither of us brought up my Shogi history. It was sort of our mutual understanding that didn't need to be said.

“A young beaut' around must do wonders for sales. Yer a lucky man, Kiyotaki-sensei.”

Young women are a rare sight in Shogi classrooms, or so I'm told. It didn't matter that I wasn't good at it and hated Shogi, the customers treated me like a star.

That is, until Ginko came.

That bizarre little girl instantly became the talk of my father's Shogi classroom.

She didn't know the first thing about how to treat customers and hardly ever said a word, but all of that was overlooked because she was good at Shogi. Then, they wouldn't give me the time of day no matter how friendly I was.

“That Ginko's got some real talent, she does.”

“This classroom has got a bright future as long as she's here.”

“You should really take a page or two out of her book, Keika.”

I wanted to tell them exactly where they could shove all their *advice*, but I just smiled and turned the other cheek. This is a business, and customers are important.

All that built up anger got unloaded on one tiny little girl.

“Would you just stop already!”

It came to a head one day, a day that I yelled right in Ginko's face.

“Seeing you makes me sick! Why ... why do you always have to follow me around like this?!”

I, a high school student, vented all of my frustration onto a girl not even old

enough for elementary school. I just couldn't stop myself.

Ginko was the perfect daughter for my father and all the customers in his classroom. Me, I was just some failed prototype.

That feeling of inferiority, the loathing I had for Shogi and all the negative emotions I felt ever since Ginko came into my life boiled over. And I hit that girl with every single one of them.

“.....”

However, Ginko didn't budge in the face of all my raging fury.

Instead, she said something I never saw coming.

She didn't cry, get angry at me or try to run away—.

“..... The Silver.”

She held up that magnetic Shogi set she always carried with her and said this:

“The Silver is always next to the Knight and Lance.”

I was floored.

What Ginko, the *gin* in her name meaning silver, was referring to was Shogi's opening formation. The Silver, Knight and Lance are all lined up in a row. No matter how intense the battle, they always return to that same spot once it's done. As to why: because it's where the Silver, Knight and Lance belong That's Shogi, plain and simple.

Just like how Ginko didn't need a reason to like Shogi, she didn't need a reason to be close to me. That's what she was saying.

All she had for me was affection. Far too pure, untainted affection.

“I'm so sorry, Ginko! Really I'm sorry!”

I was in tears before I knew it, my arms wrapped around the girl in front of me in a big hug. I lost count of how many times I apologized, but I kept going just the same.

Shogi was all this girl knew.

Shogi was her world, but she and I were part of it.

In that moment, I could feel my hatred for the game start to disappear.

It was a year after that day that I decided to set my sights on becoming a Women's League player and registered for the Practice League.

🏠 MESSAGE

“Uwahh≡ Master, thank you very much!!”

I tie Ai’s hair into two ponytails and she turns around with a big smile on her face.

There was kind of an angry vibe coming from her about halfway through What set her off? Oh well, she’s in a good mood now, so no big deal.

“Now it’s my turn to dry your hair as a thank you, meow≡”

“That’s nice of you to offer, but my hair is already dry”

I run my fingers through my hair and roll my neck a few times.

Seeing that, a hint of worry passes over my apprentice’s face.

“Um Master? You’ve been doing that a lot these days. Are your shoulders tense?”

“Oh? Yeah It’s because I haven’t given this many instructional lessons in a long time. My shoulders, neck, back even my arms and legs aren’t used to being in that position so long, so pretty much everything is tight”

All this intense training and hard work around the bathhouse must be catching up with me. How out of shape am I?

Ai takes a seat on my knee and says with a glint in her eyes, “In that case, Master, I’ll give you a massage to say thank you!”

“..... A massage? You?”

“Yes! I think I can do it just as well as a masseuse! I grew up at a hot spring, remember!”

“That right?”

I might actually enjoy this. If her massaging skills are anywhere near what

she can do in the kitchen, there's a chance it'll feel so good I'll die right in the middle of it. Now I'm kinda scared.

"..... O-Okay then. I suppose I'll take you up on it."

"Sure!!"

Ai circles around behind me this time as her little hands go to work massaging my shoulders.

"Wow, sir you're very tense."

"Ah you think so?"

"What do you do for work?"

"Ahhh I play Shogi, professionally"

"Really? That's got to be a hard job."

Thump, thump. Rub, rub.

Ai pounds my shoulders with little fists and then starts working my muscles with those warm, squishy hands of hers. She claimed she could give a *pro-level* massage, and her technique is certainly close to what a masseuse can do. The area she's working on is already loosening up. The fact that my apprentice cares for me enough to do this warms my heart but

"..... Hey, Ai. Sorry, but you're just not strong enough."

"T-Then, I'm not that good"

"I didn't say that. There's nothing wrong with your massage, but Shogi players' muscles just get too tight. Even the esteemed author Haruki Murakami once wrote that *Shogi players' shoulders get the tightest of all*"

"Whaaat?! That award-winning novelist?!"

Haruki Murakami-*sensei* used to write books while running a jazz café in Sendagaya pretty close to the Kanto Shogi association. He probably had many opportunities to hear about pro players' stiff shoulders, most likely while

getting his own massages. Good grief. Everyone's tired.

I don't think it needs to be explained, but sitting on your ankles or cross-legged for upwards of ten hours or more at a time is hard on the body. There is no perfect posture. Just like how a perfect strategy doesn't exist either.

"One of the reasons why pros retire is that their backs and shoulders just can't take sitting like that anymore. I can't tell you how many times I've heard one of the older *Senseis* say that sitting like that hurts."

"O-Oh no! That's Shogi-itis!"

"It's becoming normal for Go players to sit in chairs during the matches, but it's still standard for Shogi to be played on *tatami* mats, so once sitting on your ankles becomes too painful, you have no choice but to retire"

Compared to Go, which has a decent following worldwide, Shogi is a proud traditional Japanese mainstay. I don't see anything happening to the standards for a long time.

Which makes it all the more important that I take care of my body while I'm young.

Letting myself get this out of whack is very unprofessional. I need to fix it, pronto.

"..... Alright. Ai."

"Yes?"

"Walk on me."

"..... What?"

"Walk on my neck and shoulders with your feet. And my lower back too. Walk all over them."

"Huh?! B-But You're my Master, I couldn't possibly"

"It's fine, it's fine. You have my permission, so please."

I spread a towel out over the floor and lie face down. “Please!” I say with authority to give my confused apprentice a little encouragement.

“W-Well, um Okay I will use my feet!”

“Good. No need to hold back.”

“H Here I go!!”

Step.

“Owhhh!!”

“Eeep?! M-Master, are you okay?! Did that hurt?!”

“Nope, just the opposite. That felt darn good ≡”

“It it did?”

Ai cautiously steps on my neck and shoulders again. *Press, press.*

She must be getting over her nerves, because each step has a bit more weight to it now. She’s even pinpointing spots.

“Yeah Just like that, Ai. Sooo good ≡”

“Ehehe≡ I’m happy that you’re happy, Master≡ Meow!”

There’s that cat talk again from my apprentice with a head of catlike hair. She’s even kneading my back like a cat would do. Sooo cute.

Then came another voice.

“Hey! Ai! What are you doing?!”

“Giving Master a massage!”

“D-Don’t scare me like that”

Mio sounds surprised, while Ayano sounds genuinely scared. I don’t really blame them, walking in on an apprentice who is walking all over her Master as he makes happy sounds like *Ahh ≡* and *Ohh ≡* face down on the floor ... I would be surprised too.

“Cha too! Cha wants to stewpy stwep!!”

She probably thinks it’s some kind of new game. Charlette runs right for me, jumping onto my back and digging her tiny feet right into me.

“Stwepy stwep♪ Masta, how’s Cha’s stwepy stwep?”

“Ahh Really good, Charlette Amazing”

“Alllllright! I’ll give it my all for Kujuryu-sensei!”

“I, I’ll try my best, too!”

Mio and Ayano each take a leg, massaging my calves and the bottom of my feet with gusto. A full body massage from elementary schoolers Out of this world!

“Master! How are you feeling?!”

“..... Like I was just crowned king of the world.”

All four grade schoolers express their gratitude for me by helping my whole body relax Thanks to that, not only are my muscles exhausted from battle, but even my heart is at ease.

You could try all the spas and massage parlors here in Kyoubashi and never find this level of satisfaction, I guarantee it!

That’s especially true for Charlette’s warm, squishy little feet. They’re pretty much an expensive massaging machine in their own right. Sooo relaxing

“Ahhh Sooo good Everyone, this is so good The best feeling ever ≡”

Now I get it This right here

“This is the weight of life!”

Press!

That weight suddenly came down hard in the back of my head, driving my

face into the floor.

“Nmhh? Ai, not right there. Step lower, closer to my shoulders, okay?”

“And?”

That ... wasn't Ai That voice was cold, like ice.

Th that voice was It couldn't be———.



“Big Sissphf!!”

“Keep your head down.”

PRESS! Grind, grind, grind!!

Naniwa’s Snow White mercilessly drives her younger brother apprentice’s face into the floor with one black-nylond foot, then says with a voice as icy as absolute zero, “I know you’re perverted, but would you act like an actual human and keep your head down? Perverts should act like perverts and be satisfied licking the floor the little girls were walking on, don’t you think? That should be good enough for you. Isn’t that right Loli King?”

Owowowowowow

Big Sis’s rage is coming through the bottom of her foot and right into the back of my head. I can’t do anything but just lay here, trembling.

“Ummmm”

The four girls are cowering in the corner of the lobby. Even Ai, who always stands up to Big Sis, is too overwhelmed to stand her ground. Terrifying.

“I wondered what you were up to when I heard you were doing high-level practice sessions at Oishi-sensei’s bathhouse Yes. Very high level. Of a Lolita complex.”

“No, no, no! It’s not like that! You got it all wrong, Big Sis!!”

“How do you think you’ll talk your way out of this situation? You just said that having multiple grade school girls walk all over you was the *best feeling ever*≡— Did you not, Yaichi? More like the grossest feeling ever.”

“Just listen!! I-I can explain Yes, a refresh! I’ve been practicing Shogi so hard that I needed to refresh myself!”

“With grade schoolers?”

“It’s not like that, okay?!!”

Stop getting hung up on one part! A lot more went into this! It'll sound like I'm the scum of the human race if you only say that!! It sounds a bit like you're thinking it already!!

"I didn't choose them because they're in elementary school! My apprentice and her friends just happen to be grade schoolers And they offered to massage me to show their gratitude?! What's perverted about that?!"

"The one getting excited by a full body massage from elementary schoolers, you!"

"Then would the junior high schooler want to join in?"

"A! Pike! Right! Through! Your! Skull!!"

Stomp, stomp, stomp! Big Sis's stockinged foot slams into the back of my head over and over. Please stop, I'm losing brain cells down here! I'll get worse at Shogi, so stop, I'm begging you!

"W-What are you even doing here, Big Sis?!"

"For a practice session, what else?"

Huh?

"C-Couldn't be The Sub League member practicing with Mr. Oishi is"

"That would be me."

"Maestrooooooooo!! Tell meeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee!!"

Why leave it at a *researcher* and a *passionate Sub Leaguer* and not tell me who you're actually playing against?! That was on purpose, wasn't it?!

That particular researcher and passionate Sub League member starts talking with a very icy tone.

"..... I thought I would get your opinion on Keika's situation but That's right. There's no way your people would understand the feelings of earthlings like Keika and I, now is there"

E-Earthlings? What's she talking about?

Wait! The important part was——.

“Um Big Sis? Keika's situation? How is she doing——?”

“Fine. I understand. It's peerfectly clear. You just go on playing your little game. But I'm going to prove to all of you that we can still compete on your level if we fight as hard as we can. So——.”

Big Sis kicks my head like a soccer ball and yells, “Drop dead! All of you Shogi Martians!!”

Leaving those bizarre words behind, she left the building. I don't get it, what's that supposed to mean?

■ AI YASHAJIN'S VALUES

“..... It's what's going on, so”

“Ohh, why not die then?”

I explain what's been happening to Ai Yashajin during our review session, but she looks at me like she couldn't care less and says so with more than a hint of dry humor.

We're in the association's second-floor classroom.

Ai's bodyguard Akira Ikeda is a few seats away, arms folded and playing against an elementary school kid. She seems really fired up.

“..... Do you think Akira will keep playing Shogi?”

“She's even more devoted than I am. It's always *My Lady, we must get to the classroom as soon as possible!* or *My Lady, I can't win in Shogi wars! Please, teach me the best strategy!* with her these days It's gotten quite annoying.”

Sure, her words make it sound like she's hating this turn of events, but her voice sounds almost happy.

Getting back to what we were talking about before, I bow my head yet again.

“Sorry I told you all that to say I can't take you to my Master's house yet. I know it would be better to introduce you to him as soon as possible but”

Ai is officially my apprentice, but she hasn't had a proper meeting with Master Kiyotaki.

Of course, I told him how the whole process went down, and I know that Ai's guardian/grandfather made a phone call to formally introduce himself.

That's why I originally planned to take her to Master's place after our lesson in the association classroom today.

I even told her my plan ahead of time but with what Keika is going through and this thing with Big Sis, I decided it would be better to wait a couple of days. Big Sis getting the wrong idea and now could be fatal.

“I *will* find a good time to introduce you——.”

“I don’t really care either way. I never planned on getting close to your Shogi family anyway.”

“Again, with the spitefulness Don’t worry. We’ll throw you one heck of a party.”

“Strange. That wasn’t spite, but how I actually feel,” Ai claims before flipping her black hair with her small hand and says, “Honestly, what I’d like to know is how you can be so clingy with your opponents.”

“C-Clingy? Watch your——.”

“Kansai’s Shogi Association has so few members that the chances that you’ll play them in placement matches are very high, no? Doesn’t being so friendly with them make it hurt more for the both of you? Just like now.”

“About that”

Kanto Shogi players say that kind of thing all the time.

Everyone gets invited to events and parties in the Kansai Association, but Kanto players only invite their closest friends.

“B-But, I mean, we’re pros. We can draw a line between being friends and playing matches.”

“Aren’t you having trouble now because you can’t do that?”

“Uh”

“My word! You’re a useless Master. It’s not like I want to make friends, but you could at least follow through on your word!”

Ai looks down at me, her chin high in the air. I’m getting lectured.

It's hard to tell who's the Master and who's the apprentice anymore.

"Correct me if I'm wrong, but I believe your words were: *become a member of my Shogi family and I'll give you a good life*. I seem to remember that was your way to convince me."

"Shh! SHHHHH!! Not, not so loud!!"

Panicking, I tell her to quiet down, but it was already too late.

"Ah-ah, there's the Ryuo, talking elementary schoolers into things again"

"Didn't the Ryuo say something similar with his first apprentice? Prostrating himself in front of Ai's parents, yelling: *Please give me your daughter!*"

"He did what?! So, not just into little girls but has multiple wives?!"

Other people in the classroom glance at us out of the corners of their eyes, whispering to each other.

Unable to stop the damage from spreading, I just bite my lip and stare at my lap. The title Ryuo's prestige

"S So I hear you're undefeated so far in the Practice League. While it's great to keep advancing like this, it might be a good idea to start practicing handicaps as the upper player——."

"You needn't worry about that, *Sensei*. I'm getting plenty of experience in the city."

"..... The quiet self-motivated apprentice, I see."

"You can't take amateur practice sessions and Internet matches lightly. There are plenty of people good enough to be professionals, and they use plenty of early game strategies that professionals have never seen."

"Yes. I think you have a good point."

Strategies like Bishop Exchange Fourth File Rook and Central Rook Left *anaguma* that are making waves in the pro scene right now were originally

developed and perfected by amateurs.

There's almost no waiting time permitted in amateur tournaments, and it's all sudden-death matches. Therefore, they come up with all sorts of techniques to deal with those conditions that pros would never think of.

Then there's the fact that those techniques can be easily adapted to the Practice League and Women's League.

"So, I'm fine by myself. I've made it this far always being alone."

"....."

"As long as I have Shogi, that's enough."

Watching my apprentice move the pieces across the board with a lonesome air about her, I became painfully aware of my own powerlessness.

When she became a member of my Shogi family I'd promised to help her find happiness with Shogi. In reality, I can't do anything for her.

Do something for her, heck, the way everything is messed up right now, I've probably disappointed her Lost in my own anguish, Ai looks up at me with an angry red face and continues, "Sh-Shogi and a dim-witted Master is with me"

"Huh? What was that?"

Her voice faded out so much in the middle there I couldn't tell what she said.

I lean in close to make sure I hear her response when suddenly, "MY LAAAAADYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYY!!!"

Akira comes flying up to Ai like a toddler crying for her mother.

"You have to listen, My Lady!! That grade school punk, he's a dirty cheat! He doesn't play fair!! He's breaking rulessssss!!"

"B-Breaking rules? Like holding his taken pieces so you can't see them?"

"Doing extra moves while you're away from your chair?"

Ai and I try to figure out what happened, but Akira moans with tears in her eyes, saying, “Not that! Something even more cruel!!”

At last, she tells us the stunning truth.

“He keeps his King in the very corner of the board and makes his defensive walls extremely thick! That’s against the rules! It has to be!!”

That’s a plain *anaguma*.

“He’s not breaking any rules.”

“A perfectly legal move

“It’s not, I tell you! There’s a rule against it!!”

All that pain and frustration. Akira is stomping the floor like a spoiled kid. There are plenty of those.

But still, I can relate to wanting *anaguma* to be against the rules. Even in the pro Shogi world, I think so. On the other hand, it’s a very effective strategy to play

“Please, My Lady! That boy, make him suffer!!”

“Haaa I suppose it must be done. Which one?”

Ai stands up, a little annoyed, but she’s got the eyes of someone going to avenge her fallen friend. How nice of her.

“You’re going? Seriously, someone at his level isn’t worth your time.”

“..... Not worth my time, you say? Hah!”

Ai flicks her long black hair over her shoulder like a black wing as soon as I said that.

Her next words were so serious, they caught me off guard.

“Don’t hold back, no matter who you’re playing, and win. That’s all.”

That’s who she is in a nutshell. Ai Yashajin: damn cool.

“..... Looks like I’m out.”

“Yessah!”

I pump my fist in triumph the instant Mr. Oishi threw in the towel.

“That took forever!! Now I’m finally an All-Rounder!!”

“..... Don’t throw yourself a parade just for winning one match. You’re the Ryuo, yeah?”

The bathhouse isn’t open yet. Mr. Oishi, who used a bit of his spare time to work through some Shogi strategies with me in the first-floor lobby, forces a smile and continues.

“But you have gotten a little worldlier. The same is true for Ai. For the two of you to pick up so much so quickly really makes it feel like teaching was worth it.”

“Oh yeah. You saying *teaching* reminded me——.”

It’s Sunday. The Practice League is meeting today.

With both Ai and Asuka out of the building, I finally have a chance to tell Mr. Oishi about what happened the other day Of course, leaving out the fact that his daughter rinsed my back in the men’s bath.

“Asuka wants to learn how to play Shogi?”

“Yes. She brought it up out of nowhere Did you notice?”

“Well, I had an inkling. She gets a look in her eyes when there’s a match going on.”

Picking up the plastic pieces from on top of the vinyl Shogi board, Mr. Oishi didn’t look particularly surprised to hear that.

“..... Asuka, she has watched me and other customers play Shogi since she was a little tyke. At first, I think she just wanted attention though Must’ve been about Ai’s age. That’s when she started *reading*.”

“She was interested in the game itself?”

“She was. So, I took it on myself to show her the ropes but——.”

“But?”

“She didn’t have talent,” the Maestro said bluntly. “I’m a parent like any other. I’d always dreamed that any child of mine would have a knack for Shogi, long before Asuka was born Thought it would be fun to play and work as a family like that.”

“Mr. Oishi”

“To tell the truth, I was going to name her *Hisha* rather than *Asuka*.”

Her name would’ve literally been *Rook*?! *Flying bird* is so much better. What’s going on in this guy’s head?

“But the Mrs., she flat out refused to go along with it and we settled on *Asuka* Thanks to that, she still brings it up whenever we argue. Happened just the other day actually, we nearly tore into each other. She’s back at her parent’s place right now.”

“So that’s why I never saw your wife around”

I thought it was strange she wasn’t here.

“Thinking back on it now, *Asuka* was the right decision. That girl, she doesn’t have a speck of talent in her. Even as her father, I have to admit it.”

“So you stopped teaching her?”

“I did. Told her to *give it up cold turkey*. It’s better to shut these things down early before they get too far along.”

Mr. Oishi’s tone strengthens, pretty unusual for him.

“You’ve seen it yourself, right? How painful it is to try to survive in the Shogi world without talent.”

“..... Yes.”

Some people swear to never touch a Shogi board again.

Others suffer.

Shogi, something they’d always loved with all their hearts, becomes their worst enemy at the drop of a hat. Even people who once thought *I could never live without Shogi*, want nothing more than to see it burn.

That’s the Sub League and the Practice League for Women’s League players.

“The Sub League’s age limit is twenty-six, twenty-seven for the ladies. People who have only known Shogi their whole lives up to that point get thrown out into the real world if they couldn’t turn pro That happened to so many people in my generation. While I know they’re not pushing up the daisies A lot have fallen off the map to the point where I can’t reach them. As a father, I couldn’t bear to see my daughter go through that much pain.”

I don’t have any kids of my own, but I can relate to what he’s saying, painfully so.

If Ai Hinatsuru or Ai Yashajin went through that Just thinking about it makes my heart cringe.

“I thought I didn’t have any talent myself for a while after I went pro. Pretty certain of it actually. After all, there’s a talent that transcends eras in my generation.”

I knew immediately who he was talking about: The Meijin.

“But, you’re the one that beat him to take that title, are you not? And you did it twice”

“That second one he took right back.”

Mr. Oishi dryly laughs.

“Even so, I thought that everything I’d achieved was because I worked harder than anyone else. It was because I worked harder than anyone else that I became a professional, that I claimed titles. But——.”

“But?”

“I learned something while teaching my daughter how to play and playing against customers in this classroom. You can teach students exactly the same way, but some will grow while others don’t. Even if they’re all trying their damndest, some get rewarded while others don’t. Why do you think that is?”

“Is it talent?”

“That it is. That’s why I changed my mind. It wasn’t that I tried harder than anyone else in the Sub League, I just happened to be born with more *talent* that they were. That’s what made me into a pro.”

“.....”

“The Sub League is a living hell. Everyone is playing with their lives on the line. Doesn’t it sound a bit arrogant to say that I tried harder than anyone else in that kind of environment?”

When I was asked if I had talent, I said, “No.”

However, if I were asked if *talent* existed in the Shogi world, I would probably say, “Yes.”

Effort makes dreams come true.

That’s the truth. No matter how talented someone is, they won’t achieve anything without effort.

Unfortunately, there are some things that effort alone cannot achieve. Effort alone

“So What should I do? About Asuka”

“Personally, I’d like you to put her daydreams to bed, permanently.”

“To be the executioner? Well, that’s a downer

Whoever ends up playing against someone in danger of getting knocked out of the Sub League or dropping out of being a pro gets dubbed the *executioner*. We call it that because it’s their job to *end a Shogi life*.

“I’m not asking *you* to do it, per se.”

“.....?”

Not me?

Then who would Wait?!

“Mr. Oishi? You couldn’t mean The whole reason you decided to teach me and Ai how to play Ranging Rook was

“..... Talent isn’t the only problem. Asuka isn’t cut out for competition. That girl——.”

Mr. Oishi got that far when he suddenly stopped in midsentence.

It was because we heard the front door open.

“I’m terribly sorry. But we’re not open——,” I say as I turn toward the front door, but stop cold.

Standing there——was my first apprentice, totally drenched.

“?! Ai! W-What’s wrong?! You’re soaked!”

“.....”

Ai glances up at me as if she’s just noticed I’m in the room.

She looks like a ghost, no energy at all. What’s worse, everything from her head down to her fingernails is dripping wet. Something is definitely wrong with

her. She's shaking a little bit too.

"..... Master"

Ai, clearly not completely with it, stands just inside the doorway and mumbles under her breath in short, choppy bits.

"..... Um, the rain It started, right after the Practice League, when I left I, then But, being wet doesn't matter because I I did something horrible to Mio"

Mio? What could've happened between the two of them?

"Did you let a match get away?" Mr. Oishi asks in a kind voice.

But Ai doesn't even look up when she responds. It was almost like she was trying to use grit to make her way through pain.

"..... The match I won"

My sopping wet apprentice sniffles really loud, but the dam broke. Tears start pouring out of her eyes.

Cold droplets of water falling off her hair and clothes were joined by hot tears dripping from her cheeks, all plopping on the floor at her feet.

"..... I won but I, I! I won, but"

Ai grabs hold of her chest with her trembling right hand and screams at the top of her lungs.

"I won but My heart hurts"

RECORD 4

Mio Mizukoshi

みず 越 零

DATE OF BIRTH: AUGUST 24TH

BLOOD TYPE: AB

HOMETOWN: OSAKA

SPECIALTIES: UNICYCLING
WOLFING DOWN SCHOOL LUNCH
SHOGI!

FAVORITE FOOD: 551'S PORK DUMPLING



THE PAIN OF VICTORY

Ai beat Mio during today's Practice League *playing with the upper player's handicap*.

That's what the drenched and bawling Ai managed to say between sobs.

"..... Mio, she was acting strange before the match too and I've never played without my Lance before, and was confused but Mio, couldn't keep up"

In the end, she said Mio lost because she shot herself in the foot too many times.

"Right after she said, *I lost*, Mio started crying her eyes out sitting in front of the board She's never done that, I, I didn't know what to do"

Mio held a higher rank in the Practice League when Ai joined. She also helped my apprentice get her bearings, feeling it was her duty as the experienced one.

Since she'd lost to Ai in an even match before, she probably knew that Ai was better than her.

Even still I doubt she expected to lose with a handicap on her side.

She must've figured it out. She had to know Ai was special. That her talent was on another level.

But losing to a girl her own age, one who started playing Shogi long after she did—like Ai—hurts like nothing else. Getting overtaken by her in the Practice League, then losing with a handicap I bet that's so painful, she doesn't want to play another round of Shogi. I can relate to that pain. I've felt it before.

No matter how strong your opponent is, losing hurts every time. That's Shogi.

I don't consider myself to be anywhere near the top Shogi players in terms of skill. I'm just a lucky guy who got hot at the right time and claimed a title. My

skills are still at the bottom of the pro barrel ... I'm well aware.

Even so. Even though I know.

Say I play against an absolute overlord like the Meijin, say I put up an epic fight: I'd still cry out in pain if I lost. That's what Shogi is, so everyone fights with everything they've got. No matter what we do, we play to win every time.

Losing hurts, okay? It hurts really bad! It's the single most painful, saddest feeling in the world!!

But right now, the one who just won the match, Ai is crying harder than she ever has after a loss, her face dark and dreary.

"I, I didn't know that winning could hurt like this"

"Ai"

Here stands my soaking wet, sobbing nine-year-old apprentice.

A fourth-grade girl so kindhearted she regrets hurting her precious friend's heart, and feels so much pain in her own it made her cry.

To that young girl, I say, "Would you lose for her?"

"Huh"

"Would you throw the game for her when you have a handicap? Would you be satisfied losing on purpose, acting sad and upset just so that Mio would be happy?"

"N-No! I, I could never"

I'm sure she was expecting me to comfort her.

She expected that I, her Master, would be able to do something about the searing pain that won't go away. She dragged her broken heart all the way to me, believing that I could fix it.

I wanted to give her a big hug.

I wanted to tell her to take a hot bath, wanted to say all the nice things I could, tell her: *It's not your fault*, and wipe away her tears. It'd make me feel better too.

However, I kept her standing, soaking wet in the chilly doorway and said the harshest words I have ever said to her.

Because I believe that's what I have to do as her Master.

"There's nothing wrong with sympathy. People who don't feel sympathy for the loser break down when they become one themselves."

"....."

"But, Ai. There's only one thing you should think about when you sit in front of a Shogi board. That's squeezing every last bit of strength and skill you possess into every move: and win. Everything else is just a distraction. As your Master, I won't allow you to think about anything else in front of a board."

Back when I was feeling the same pain, Master said those exact words to me.

Now I say them in the exact same tone, the exact same way to Ai.

"If you're a person who's afraid to win, there's no need to keep suffering like this. I'll release you right here and now. Pack up your things and go back to where you came from!!"

".....!"

My words were so sharp that a fresh wave of tears started building in her eyes.

This isn't some scare tactic. I'm serious.

"..... I knew someone just like you, back in the Sub League," Mr. Oishi said gently after quietly waiting for me to finish.

"He had talent, talent like you wouldn't believe. He and I were in the same year in school, and rivals as far back as I can remember. He had double ... triple

the talent I did, and everyone believed that he would turn professional just as strongly as that the sun would rise in the east tomorrow morning But, on the same day he became 3-*dan*, he quit the Sub League.”

“Why? He was so close——.”

“This is what he told me: *I love Shogi. But I hate using it to hurt people, to make them feel horrible.* He studied like mad after that day and became a doctor, a pediatrician.”

Everyone knows this story in the Kansai Shogi world. That doctor took care of me and Big Sis whenever we got sick. He played Shogi with us too and always lost for us.

That’s one way to live your life.

Actually, that’s the more respectable way to live your life.

Shogi is nothing more than a game. It can’t do anything to help people. It does nothing to advance society. Quite the opposite, it wastes precious energy and produces nothing in return: worse than pointless.

But for us, Shogi is everything.

“To us, a life without Shogi isn’t worth living. There’s no point to it if we can’t play. And if Shogi is taken away from us, there’s nothing left. Shogi is all we need.”

With that in our hearts, we throw everything else away and fight.

Doesn’t matter if it’s the pros, Sub League, the Practice League or amateurs.

The people who believe that with all their hearts are true *Shogi players*.

“We can’t lose. It doesn’t matter who we’re playing. Then there’s no need to think about anything else. Am I right?”

“..... Yes!” Ai nods.

Trying to never shed another tear in front of her Master, to never cry out in

pain again She clenches her little fists and bites down hard on her lip, eyes focused ... all while trembling like a wet puppy.

Ai is determined to stay with me, to not give me a reason to throw her out. Her mind is set on winning.

But that does nothing to heal her bleeding heart.

We inflict wounds on each other's hearts to get stronger. Our hearts get covered with scabs, but they'll come back with thicker *skin* than ever before once they heal. Just like broken bones heal stronger than they were before the break, wounded hearts come back stronger than they used to be.

On the other hand, if a wounded heart takes another hit before it can heal it will shatter into pieces and their fighting spirit will never come back.

"Whew"

My face didn't relax until my apprentice disappeared into the women's changing room. Scolding is hard work

But the real hard part is just getting started.

Mio is the grade schooler practice session leader. If Ai and Mio's relationship falls apart, it'll affect the other girls as well.

People who were too strong to begin with tend to strike out on their own once they start feeling jealousy and rejection coming their way. It takes a strong mind to fight that battle. I'd really hate to see Ai leave the group

"..... She's a good kid, that Ai," said Mr. Oishi profoundly, coming back to the lobby after opening the baths early for Ai. It's just the two of us again.

"She's got a strong spirit and always tries her best. Kids like that go far. You don't have to worry about her. It might be a while before she comes back to using Ranging Rook though"

Ai was practicing Ranging Rook here to get ready to be down a piece during Practice League matches, but she did a little too well and hurt her best friend with those skills.

That'll be a vice, one that'll probably clamp down on her potential for a while.

Shogi isn't some simple game where you level up with experience every time you win. The way you win can weigh on your heart, and that weight can hold you back.

"Yoshitsune Kuruno is the head of the Practice League, right? He'll know how to follow this up. He's a Ranging Rooker too."

True, it's good to know that Kuruno-*sensei* will be there. But I don't see what him playing Ranging Rook has anything to do with it

"..... Yeah. I think Ai'll be fine. The problem is——."

"The kid that got beat"

"..... It seems that Mio has been in a slump."

I sigh as I think back on how she was acting upstairs not too long ago. If only I'd picked up on it that day

"She was going against her usual style, trying to play *anaguma*. But rather than breaking out of her slump, trying to change things up just made it worse. It sure didn't help that——."

"She was watching Ai get better every day, I bet. That kind of thing happens all the time."

"You're right about that. Happens all too often."

This isn't just a problem for children. Even in the pros, I've heard about players getting so hung up on a rival that's too good and they end up tripping over their own feet.

Talent is like a typhoon.

In the very center where the person is, everything is quiet and calm. But anyone who happens to be nearby gets blown over

“Yaichi, ever gone head-to-head with the Meijin?”

“Not yet. I’m not sure if that’s good or bad”

“Playing against him, it doesn’t matter if you win or lose. You will go into a slump. It’s always because he does something *you would never try* when he plays. It’s inspiring, so much so that you want to give it a go yourself and end up losing your balance trying to reach too far, Do that enough times, and you learn.”

“Learn what?”

“That no matter what you try, you could never reach him.”

“.....”

“It’s all well and good if you win because you get the feeling that things’ll work out even if you can’t reach that level. You won’t, but there’s still hope. Losing, on the other hand, it’s devastating. That last little sliver of hope gets crushed, and you can’t win against him again ... ever. Even if some people win their first few matches, the vast majority keep losing against him because he poisons their spirits during battle.”

“Poison?”

“Yeah. Poison. The kind called *despair* and *resignation*. He’s been seeping that poison into our spirits, rotting our hopes and dreams from the inside.”

Rotting spirits, poison

I feel like I just got a taste of what the Meijin can do. Mr. Oishi’s words carry a lot of weight because he’s experienced it himself.

“The only thing you get out of losing is that miserable realization. No amount of losing Shogi matches will make you stronger. You get worse. If there’s part of you that still feels like you can win, that’s only because you *haven’t played him*

yet. That's all."

"Thanks for the tip, but it's still too early for me to think about playing against him. There's no telling when it'll happen."

"That's a lie."

".....!"

"Natagiri is his training partner. The two of them are All-Rounders with a Static Rook playing style. Natagiri is basically Meijin-lite. And the main reason you wanted to pick up Ranging Rook wasn't to prepare to face Natagiri or for placement matches."

"....."

"To win against the Meijin, yeah? You're anticipating that he'll show up to challenge you in the Ryuo League. You'd better brace yourself. If you can't win against Natagiri, your chances against the Meijin are a big fat zero ... probably won't win one victory off him."

"..... Do you think, I can win? The way I am now? Against Mr. Natagiri."

I didn't ask about the Meijin because I already knew the answer.

"In terms of talent, you have a distinct advantage. Pretty sure I said it before, but Natagiri is the least talented professional I've ever met."

"But, then how is it that he made it into A League?"

There are only ten players in A League. That's all.

The best of the best, with only the Meijin above them.

I may be at the top of the Shogi world with the title of Ryuo, but in terms of rank, I'm near the bottom of C-2, tenth from last to be exact. Even if I were to somehow keep winning enough to advance into A League starting right now, it would take at least four years to get there. That's how far they are above me.

Just like the way I looked down on him when we first played, I don't think Mr.

Natagiri is A League material either. Pretty much everyone in the Shogi world would agree that, if it weren't for his research, he'd be nothing at all

"Please, tell me Maestro. What's Mr. Natagiri's secret?"

"..... We were just talking about talent and effort, yeah? Remember what I said?"

"Of course. Everyone's pushing themselves to their limit in the Sub League, so in the end it's talent that determines who becomes a professional Or something like that?"

"That it was. Every single professional gave as much effort as they had to make it out of the Sub League. However, very few maintain that level of effort in the professional leagues."

"So, Mr. Natagiri kept working that hard even after he left?"

"Nope. *He tries even harder.*"

".....!"

"He played Static Rook back in the Sub League, and only *yagura* style at that. He became an All-Rounder after joining the professional ranks. He took a lot of heat, everyone saying, *Talentless people like you don't deserve to imitate the Meijin, but that didn't stop him* Until one day his flawless understanding of every battle strategy caught the Meijin's attention, when he chose him as a training partner."

Mr. Oishi keeps going. His voice sounds like saying it out loud made him feel queasy.

"His level of grit isn't human. It's abnormal. No matter how many times you flatten him into dust, you prove that your talent is leagues ahead of his, he comes right back like a zombie: a stronger zombie too. That's why I hate that guy. Because every time I look at him, it makes me feel like I'm slacking off."

"....."

“As a training partner, Natagiri is constantly being poisoned by the Meijin’s talent. But rather than rot, he keeps getting stronger. He has the ability to acknowledge another person’s talent and then blend their playing style with his own. It’s all part of his research, taking their best attacks head-on and learning from his mistakes. That’s why he loves playing against good, talented players. Yaichi: think he has his eye on you?”

“..... Well, I kind of have that feeling

Is that what *that* was? I think he had his *eye on me* in a different way but

“Losing doesn’t scare Natagiri. It’s not that his Shogi is that strong, it’s his spirit. That’s why his research is so in-depth, his Shogi repertoire is so deep. He’s not your average researcher. He’s just as muddy and bone-headedly stubborn as the rest of us here in Kansai, a genuine Shogi player.”

A genuine Shogi player

“You asked me what Natagiri’s secret was, yeah? There is no secret. He works harder than anyone else. He’s committed his life to Shogi, no joke. He is strong because he’s putting in more effort than anyone else. Only natural, don’t you think?”

Stronger, because he’s trying harder than anyone.

Sounds natural, but not many people can naturally do what he’s doing.

“That being said, the one thing that can overcome effort is talent. The fourth junior high school professional and youngest title holder in history It pisses me off, but your talent is the real deal. Seeing you pick up Ranging Rook firsthand, if there was any doubt before, it’s gone now.”

“.....”

“Your talent against Natagiri’s effort. Looking at it objectively, I’d say that Natagiri has a slight edge on you but the match will come down to how much your Ranging Rook rattles him.”

My Ranging Rook is the key?

I may have learned from the *Worldly Maestro*, but my Ranging Rook is just a sharpened stick. Nothing compared to the tempered steel that Mr. Natagiri has forged.

However, I've decided to bet everything on my underdeveloped skills.

Nothing will happen if I don't take that first step.

"..... By the way, Mr. Oishi. About what you were going to say before, about Asuka not being fit to play Shogi——."

"She's too kind. A lot like Ai. The difference is that Ai has talent, Asuka does not."

Mr. Oishi seems really hung up on talent, but there is a reason for it.

"There's only one way to heal a broken heart. Winning. People with talent get better, so they'll start winning again sooner or later. Without talent, however, people will just keep losing. That's horrible, don't you think? What's wrong with a father protecting his daughter from that kind of torture?"

That's not right. Part of me felt that way.

But I didn't say a word against him. And something occurred to me.

If we had this conversation before I took an apprentice, I probably would've spoken up——.

🏠 ALL-ROUNDER

Then, Monday. Today's the day I play against Mr. Natagiri.

My apprentice and I left the apartment at the same time this morning: she left for school and I went to the association for my match. Ai has been acting all bubbly and energetic but I can tell she's still hurting inside.

Just as I was using a crosswalk on the streets of Naniwa, "Morning!"

I was greeted by a smooth hello and a smooth smile from today's opponent.

"G-Good morning Mr. Natagiri."

"Let's have fun today, alright?"

Most opponents give each other a nod of acknowledgement and call it good right before the match, but this guy went straight for the full-blown meet and greet. Not sure if his personal preferences are as *straight*, but

As awkward as it was, I couldn't tell him to *Please go away*, and ended up walking all the way to the association with him.

I tried to break off the timing by stopping to buy some tea at the first-floor vending machine, but he very politely held the elevator for me. What a nice guy. Please, go on ahead

"Wow. Today must be my lucky day."

"H-How so?"

Now alone with him in the elevator, Mr. Natagiri stands just a little closer than he has to and says with that same smooth smile, "To be 100 percent frank with you, I overslept this morning. It was really late when I arrived in Osaka last night"

"Were you busy?"

I was thinking he would smile that smooth smile of his and say, *I was partying in Shinjuku's alternative red light district!* but his actual response was even more shocking in a way.

“The Meijin and I had a practice session yesterday. Since it was the day before our match, Yaichi, I wanted to focus on you, but he’s a very busy man and doesn’t have much time And, oh yes, he said he was looking forward to our match.”

“! The Meijin He’ll watch this match?”

“He certainly will. Not just this one, he’s been reviewing all your matches, Ryuo.”

“.....”

The Meijin my matches? All of them?

At first, it was an honor. I was genuinely happy.

Happy that someone as busy as he is would take the time to check my match records, because that means something about me is worth checking—meaning he thinks I’m good enough to look into.

However, that honor disappeared after a few minutes with intense pressure taking its place.

The Meijin is watching me Great, now I can’t afford even one bad move.

But worse than that the fact that he’s reading through my match records and he’s already dissecting my playing style means he’s preparing for our inevitable match.

The best Shogi player in history has his eyes on my title My knees start shaking as a realization that should have been obvious—the Meijin wants what I have—hit me harder than ever before.

Yes. I’m afraid.

Like a rabbit that knows a lion is looking at him

Almost as if he saw right through me, Mr. Natagiri whispers into my ear, “Looks like neither of us can do anything too crazy today.”

“.....!”

He got me, I thought to myself.

He got me to think about something other than the match right before it starts.

It’s difficult to shake off Meijin *pressure* once it sets in. It’ll probably creep back into my head if I’m not careful during the match.

This might be an off-the-board ploy of some kind but I’d better make sure my Shogi doesn’t freeze up

We step out of the elevator on the fourth floor and the two of us go into the arena side by side.

Today’s match is a preliminary placement match for the Ken-ou League.

The Ken-ou League isn’t connected to any of the seven Shogi titles, but it’s special in that the matches are broadcast over the Internet and rank determines the preliminary matches.

Whereas I’d normally be called by my title, Ryuo, here I’m just Kuzuryu 8-*dan*.

The match will take place in a room called *Minase* on the fourth floor because of all the equipment needed for the broadcast. Players usually use this room to eat lunch during their break, so there’s a microwave right outside the door.

“Good morning.” Several people greet us as Mr. Natagiri and I walk into the room together.

The match recorder and journalist are already sitting at their table next to the board. The only thing left is for us to get the match underway.

“Kuzuryu and Natagiri enter the arena in friendly fashion, and got it,” says Ms.

Mato, the Shogi journalist as she scribbles something down on the paper in front of her. Please no.

“I will conduct a piece flip,” the match recorder says as he stands on his feet. Now we find out who will go first.

The Ken-ou League allows one hour of waiting time. It'll be one-minute Shogi after that.

Preparation becomes even more important for matches with so little waiting time.

If you come with an hour's worth of plans ready to roll, and everything goes the way you want, you can actually end up with close to two hours of waiting time. So, preparation is huge.

As long as you can throw your opponent off their game and force them to play your way, you can build a big lead early on with waiting time alone. That advantage comes in handy when the match is on the line.

“Natagiri-sensei, please make the first move.”

..... Yesss!

I mentally pump my fist. Of course, I make a face like *Rats, I'm on defense!* and try to look disappointed.

“..... Drawing the second move, Kuzuryu appears distraught. Perhaps he preferred to be on offense and got it.”

Even the board-side journalist fell for it. I'm on a roll.

“It is now 10 o'clock. Please begin the match.”

“When you're ready,” we both say.

Mr. Natagiri leans over the board to make his move and opens his Bishop Path with gusto. I follow suit, opening my own Bishop Path. This opening is as orthodox as orthodox gets.

Then he wastes no time in advancing the Pawn in front of his Rook.

“..... Natagiri swiftly moves his ♗ 2 Six Pawn forward. As the defender, Kuzuryu now has complete control over how this match will unfold and got it.”

Ms. Mato is right. The match is at a crossroads, and my next move will be the deciding factor.

“Heehee! What kind of Shogi are you going to show me today?”

Mr. Natagiri is giddy.

That’s something that only an All-Rounder with the nickname *Switch Hitter* can say. He’s absolutely sure that no matter what strategy his opponent chooses, his research is better than theirs. Therefore, he can let them choose anything they want.

My Shogi has no weaknesses: that’s what he’s saying to me here on the third move of our match.

“.....”

I close my eyes and squeeze my right knee.

I already know my next move. All the training I’ve done was for this moment.

But it still takes a lot of courage to actually do it ... So many emotions are clashing in my chest.

I’d planned on five minutes to go through with it.

Five more minutes to get my head on straight.

After using ten minutes of my hour waiting time to get my thoughts in order, I make that move.

“Huh?”

“Huuuh?!”

There was a small time lag between the match recorder and journalist the moment it was done, but they made the same sound.

I'd be willing to bet the people watching this match over the Internet are typing out their disbelief in big, bold letters. Of course they are. The Ryuo, a staunch member of the Static Rook party, just did a Ranging Rook opening, so how could they not?

My move—advancing the middle Pawn, 5 Four Pawn!

“Gokigen Central Rook Is it? Well, color me surprised. Quite a shock”

Mr. Natagiri blinks several times and leans over the board for a better look. He pulls his bangs out of his eyes once he looks up and then sighs from the bottom of his lungs.

Players react several different ways whenever an opponent does something unexpected.

Some maintain a perfect poker face, while others let their surprise show. There are also some who go a little overboard with their reaction to give their opponent a false sense of security.

—Now, which one is he?

Keeping my eyes glued to the board, I focus on trying to pick up his *air*.

Not words or expressions, but a kind of energy that players have during a match Sensing it is a skill that we have as Shogi players, and only players around the board can *read* it.

“I went through every single one of your league matches Even the ones from your time in the Sub League, but there wasn't a single one where you played Ranging Rook in an even match. All for me You built up the courage to play your first Ranging Rook game all for me?”

“.....”

“Heehee! I got your first, Yaichi≡”

There are far too many ways to take what he just said, but it’s just some off-the-board ploy to distract me. Please, let that be it. Because if it’s not

“..... Natagiri rejoices in receiving Kuzuryu’s first and got it.”

The journalist looks a little too excited as her pen dances across the paper. Stop!

..... Anyway, it looks like I succeeded in catching him off guard.

As long as he wasn’t making up that story about practicing with the Meijin last night, that means he couldn’t spend as much time as he wanted to research me specifically. It’s my fourth time going against him, and I finally managed to get a lead in the early game——.

In the exact moment I came to that conclusion, he says, “Well, this is unfortunate. I wanted to face you at your best”

“.....?”

“This would have been a fair match, had it taken place *the day before yesterday* It truly is unfortunate. I’m sure the Meijin would agree with me. This match, you see, *has already been decided*”

Mr. Natagiri seriously looks disappointed as he slowly picks up a piece and tells me, “That strategy: he and I *completely solved it last night*.”

▲ BUILT UP

“Yaichi’s using Ranging Rook?!”

The words fall out of my mouth as I watch the computer screen.

Second floor of the house. There’s an old computer set up in the room where Ginko and I are practicing. There’s no mistaking that that’s Yaichi on the screen, and that he’s using a Ranging Rook opening.

“..... I knew he was practicing with Oishi-sensei, but I didn’t think he would,” Ginko whispers with her face so close to the screen she could bite it.

It’s a weekday, but apparently there’s no school today because of some event. She made that up, it’s obvious. However, I can’t be too strict with her because she’s helping me get better at Shogi.

She and I went through all of my Practice League match records from yesterday before Yaichi’s match got underway.

My results—1 win, 3 losses.

I avoided the clean sweep, but far from getting rid of the B, I couldn’t break even.

If I don’t win twice in the next Practice League session, I’ll really be in danger of dropping out.

Winning just one match feels like a massive hurdle right now.

I didn’t think that I’d win just because I’d been doing these practice sessions with Ginko—.

No, I need to be honest with myself.

Maybe I’ll start winning right away?

That naïve thought was in the back of my head the whole time.

Ginko saw that naïveté with one quick glance at my match records.

“Too plain,” she told me, spitting out those words. “Technique isn’t your problem. Too many wasted moves. It’s like you’re not even thinking.”

..... There was nothing I could say to that.

But trying to play Shogi knowing that being forced to drop down a rank might actually happen is like trying to play with a noose around your neck. It’s impossible to think everything through.

“Even so, you have to.”

“How?”

“By using everything you’ve built up.”

“Everything I’ve built up I don’t have”

“Sure you do. Right over there.”

Ginko pointed to a pile of notebooks in the corner of the room.

Research notebooks that I’d written myself.

Every single one of my match records is in there, along with things I’ve learned in the Practice League, and little tidbits I picked up while listening to professionals doing review sessions when I worked as a match recorder.

But at this point, it feels like a collection of things that other people know, their knowledge the meaningless diaries of a dress-up doll about her Shogi playing style.

“They’re not useless. Once you’re able to think for yourself, they’ll become valuable weapons.”

“Weapons? Those notebooks?”

“You have plenty of weapons, Keika. The real you is strong. But, because you think you’re weak because you have no confidence, you don’t play with your own style. You are your own roadblock.”

Me, strong? Surely, she had to be kidding.

Ginko went off like a cannon as soon as that thought passed through my head.

“Come on, Keika. Play with more confidence! That’s the most important thing for any competition!! It’s the only thing!!!”

That voice was sharp as a knife I nearly jumped back in surprise at Ginko’s tone.

Yaichi’s match appeared on the screen right after that.

All the Static Rook knowledge he’s built up After becoming Ryuo, he’s trying a completely new style of Shogi, changing himself.

That takes a great deal of courage.

Could I do that? Try something completely new during an important match.

Could I possibly do that? Change myself

Yaichi takes hold of his Rook and forcibly slides it to the center of the board.

It was a bold move, and he looked like he’d done it ten thousand times over. He’s burgeoning with confidence that I don’t have.

“Really good form.”

“That’s just form.”

Ginko is being a bit harsh. It seems that she ran into Yaichi at Oishi-sensei’s Something happened, something she couldn’t put up with. Because after that, her demeanor during our sessions became much more intense. And she’s been saying, “All the grade schoolers are going down in a bloodbath,” any chance she gets

“But Do you think Yaichi will be okay? Gokigen Central Rook hasn’t been doing well recently

“It hasn’t. Trying to use an old stick like Goki-Central against pros armed with

ferocious attacks like Extreme Speed should end in a massacre.”

What’s worse, his opponent is a well-known researcher, Natagiri 8-*dan*. There’s a good possibility that victory could get out of reach in the early game.

“But, if he’s built himself up with Oishi-*sensei*——.”

“He’s called the *Worldly Maestro* for a reason

He may have a way to deal with the Static Rook’s Extreme Speed Silver. Ginko and I wait with baited breath to see what anti-Extreme Speed strategy Yaichi has up his sleeve.

But we didn’t get to see one.

The piece that Natagiri 8-*dan* grabbed *wasn’t the Silver*.

It was——.

EXTREME SPEED BATTLE

“?! Not the Silver?”

I couldn’t stop the words from coming out when I saw what piece Mr. Natagiri grabbed.

As soon as I locked myself into Gokigen Central Rook by moving the Rook to the middle of the board, he took hold of the piece right next to his King, sliding his Gold up to face my Rook head on.

That move——.

“.....! Extreme Rapid Battle!!”

Anti-Gokigen Central Rook strategy——  5 Eight Gold Right: Extreme Rapid Battle.

Along with Extreme Speed!  3 Seven Silver, it’s one of the best strategies to use against Goki-Central.

However, there’s more to it than just a simple counter.

“I’m sure you realize what this means?”

“.....!”

I gulp down all the spit in my mouth at what he just said.

Extreme Rapid Battle has fallen out of favor recently, but that’s not because it’s worse than the other.

It’s how the board will look twelve moves from now——.

Shogi has two parties, Static Rook and Ranging Rook. While their philosophies are different, both agree that the results are set in stone by that point.

The nineteenth move decides who will win.

Therefore.

“..... Selecting Extreme Rapid Battle in this situation is equivalent to declaring an end to Gokigen Central Rook itself. Natagiri has declared his own victory on the seventh move Now that’s intense!”

The journalist vigorously scribbles those words down.

Extreme Speed was developed *to win against* Gokigen Central Rook.

Extreme Rapid Battle——was developed *to wipe it out*.

“The Meijin and I have researched this situation for ages. An answer eluded us for the longest time, so we had it shelved but it was solved ... last night.”

And the answer was? I didn’t need to ask.

“With Static Rook guaranteed victory.”

“.....”

Static Rook guaranteed victory Great.

In my time as a purely Static Rook party member, I’ve planned out many ways to go against Gokigen Central Rook. I tried whatever I thought would rip Goki-Central out of the Shogi world by the roots.

Not just me. Static Rook party players came together with our overwhelming advantage in numbers, shared our research and developed many counter strategies. Maruyama Vaccine, Double Silver Rapid Attack, Extreme Speed! ♙ 3 Seven Silver and Extreme Rapid Battle And when each one came up, it was said that Goki-Central was over.

——However, Gokigen Central Rook didn’t die.

It didn’t matter how outnumbered they were, the Ranging Rook party would find some beautiful, worldly countertactics that proved our conclusions wrong —while laughing at all of us.

I know it goes against logic But I believe in the strategy I fought so hard to destroy!

“So then It’s time to find out whose research is correct——.”

I grab the plastic bottle full of tea sitting next to me and chug it down, wiping my mouth with my sleeve when I’m done.

Static Rook and Ranging Rook.

A battle to determine their fates has officially begun. A war of annihilation.

“..... Here we go!”

I advance my central Pawn, getting on the *standard* train and barreling forward.

Once the train gets going, there’s no stopping it. The moment it goes off the rails is the moment I draw my guns.

The move nineteen problem can’t be avoided.

Both of us can see it clear as day, and we blow right by it at a breakneck speed.

“S-So fast?!”

We’re playing so quickly the match recorder is having a hard time remembering who did what. If it weren’t for his tablet, I doubt he could keep up. Then——.

“..... Here!”

Move thirty-six.

I jump off the train and slow things down, letting up on the pressure.

“Ohh? Trying something different? I see. This move——.”

Mr. Natagiri takes one look at the board, at my own research.

“I know it.”

“?! That was fast!”

That barely took a second of waiting time!

It didn't seem like he *read* that. Which means, it's all from his research.

Has he seriously looked into this variation too?!

I'm reminded once again that Mr. Natagiri's research is thorough, shockingly so.

And knowing who's behind him, who did that research with him, makes my fingers tremble.

The Meijin's shadow.

“.....”

I glance at the clock next to the board.

Twenty minutes are already gone. Only forty minutes left, a little less

My King isn't anywhere near as well protected as his, and I've lost a lot more pieces. From the Static Rook standpoint, I have to accept that I'm overwhelmingly outnumbered.

The way I used to be, my fingers would curl up and I doubt I'd even have tried to figure out what to do from here.

But right now, the Maestro's passionate words are pulsing through my head.

Don't go thinking you'll find a safe way to win. Bait your opponent into attacking, overcome it by the skin of your teeth and take the victory. That—is worldly!

Everything so far has gone exactly how I researched it.

There's no time to rethink my strategy. I have to believe this feeling in my gut and——.

..... Attack!!

I leave my King in a dangerous spot and set my sights on my opponent's King by picking up a Lance from my piece stand and slapping it down right in front of his King.

Mr. Natagiri reaches for his piece stand and does the same thing, putting a Lance down in front of his own King to block it.

"Here!!"

"Hn?!"

Rather than take that Lance, I choose this moment to deploy a Knight into the fray. By prioritizing speed over capturing reinforcements, I'll have a window to attack while he's busy taking my pieces! It's time for an all-out assault!

"..... You've chosen to challenge me to a contest of speed, have you? Heehee! I've got butterflies You don't disappoint, Ryuo. Keeping me entertained right down to the last second!"

Not only did Mr. Natagiri see what I was doing, he played along with it. Rather than worrying about exposing his King, he instead takes my Lance with his. The best possible response!

"But ... I have another one!!"

The instant a pathway to my King was open, I closed it with my last Lance.

The only thing standing between it and Mr. Natagiri's King is the Extreme Rapid Battle's signature piece, the Gold at 5 Eight.

Only one more!

If I can just get by it, his King is as good as toast. That will end the match in one swift stroke!!

Feeling that I've got a chance to finally beat the guy who's given me fits for the first time, my heart starts beating so hard I'm afraid my rib will crack. Intense!!

Just one more!!

Only one more!!

Once my Lance breaks through Mr. Natagiri's Golden Shield and promotes, it's as good as checkmate I'll win!

"And now—it's over!!"

"I wouldn't be so sure."

"Huh?"

In that moment, my mind was officially blown.

"What?!"

"Did ... did he just?!"

The match recorder and journalist are up on their knees trying to get a better look.

Mr. Natagiri's cornered and vulnerable *King took the Promoted Lance by itself and started advancing toward my territory!*

"That's—*ganmen uke*?!"

"Heehee That felt good!!"

Mr. Natagiri makes an absolutely crazy move with that smooth smile on his face, completely ignoring my offensive and sending his naked King right at me.

Rather than protecting the King, it joins the defensive formation itself to hold off an attack—the Flat-Faced Defense.

"But Seriously?! Who actually does that?!"

"So, so good!!" Mr. Natagiri keeps repeating, a look of pure ecstasy on his face.

The naked King barreling at me like a missile has an unnaturally high will to live. Mr. Natagiri plays like he's not afraid of anything. Offense and defense all

rolled into one decisive move!

Draw out their attack and win by the skin of your teeth. That's what I was going for. And it should've worked. I barely kept my King covered let him get just a few moves away from checkmate, then counterattack to snatch victory from the jaws of defeat.

However, Mr. Natagiri cut it even closer.

It wasn't the skin of his teeth, my attack cut into the King's bare skin.

It was like he figured out that my attack would come extremely close but not connect a long, long time ago. All thanks to his unbelievably thorough research.

I was the one who ended up getting attacked.

I thought I was the worldly one, but ended up being *outworlded*

"Uh gh, hh"

The happy fireworks of joy in my chest faded out in the blink of an eye.

I put my elbow on the armrest, holding my head in my hand as moans of disbelief started coming out of my mouth on their own.

"I-I"

I really can't ... win against this guy?

▲ 10 BILLION ATTEMPTS AND 1 QUADRILLION DEATHS

“One thousand hours.”

“..... Come again?”

Wondering what Mr. Natagiri meant, I lifted my head out of my hands.

“I’ve spent at least one thousand hours exclusively researching Extreme Rapid Battle. More than twice that researching Gokigen Central Rook in general, and at least ten times that researching Ranging Rook strategies.”

“.....”

“I’m playing Ranging Rook with that much preparation. Tell me, Yaichi, how much preparation have you done to play Ranging Rook?”

I started using it about two weeks ago so Maybe, one hundred hours.

As for Extreme Rapid Battle, ten hours tops.

I mean, of course I’ve been studying the standard strategies since I was a little kid, but that’s basic knowledge. Pros don’t count that as research.

“One thousand hours of prior research. One hundred of those were spent working with the Meijin You think you can overcome that disadvantage?”

I can tell exactly what is behind that smooth smile.

He’s angry.

He figured out that I haven’t put enough time into preparing and saw through my: *If I can’t win with Static Rook, I’ll play Ranging* shallow thinking Mr. Natagiri is furious.

Unfortunately, I don’t have a way to stand up for myself.

Nothing I can say with words, and nothing I can do on the board.

It feels like he's always a piece ahead—.

No, not just one piece. Several hundred At least several thousand pieces worth of research separate us. And that research is supported by his willpower—an intense desire to get better at Shogi.

It's not just a matter of skill.

I'm losing to Mr. Natagiri in desire too

“Uh ghn, uh”

I look back down at the board, more groans of agony coming out.

The problem isn't only being at a piece disadvantage anymore.

He's got a Rook and a Bishop, two big pieces right on his front line and an army of pieces waiting in the wings on his piece stand.

I'd be willing to bet that Mr. Natagiri has worked out that he'll win by one move should a battle start now.

Just like two weeks ago, when he worked out the *gentei aigoma*

“If you still think there might be something, it'd be better to give up now. Remember what I said? The Meijin and I *ended* Gokigen Central Rook last night.”

“.....”

“Our research is perfect. Nothing could ever break it.”

Perfect. A wall that can never be broken.

Faced with a wall taller and thicker than I ever thought possible, without a single crack I might add, my spirit snapped like a twig.

—Am I going to run away crying again?

“.....!!”

Zing! Pain zips through my whole body.

The scabs that kept my scarred-up heart from hurting were ripped off as open new wounds burst open. It hurts, enough to make me clench my teeth until they scream, to make me whine in pain.

I know this agony all too well.

Unendurable agony that goes right through the heart.

Agony that I must never get used to.

The *agony of defeat*.

—It's impossible, so why not give up? That wall won't break, so why even try?

“.....!!”

My spirit is already broken. I've already accepted the loss.

But the more that sinks in, the worse the pain gets. Sharper.

My chances to come from behind are pretty much zero.

But the idea that there still might be something I can do, even in this position, became painful and wouldn't let me lose. Not logic, but my instincts as a player.

There's only one way to make the impossible possible.

That's—to face it head-on.

There have always been huge walls in my way.

I could never win against my father and brother when I first started playing Shogi. I lost every match for two months straight in my first Shogi classroom. Even though she was two years younger than me, I couldn't win against Big Sis. And my first win against Master when he was playing without a Rook came two years after I became his apprentice. I got hit with a B in the Sub League, lost my

first pro match in the worst way possible and went on an eleven-game losing streak after becoming Ryuo.

Everyone probably laughed at me when I was a kid, saying that I *wanted to turn pro*. To them, it was impossible.

However, I became Ryuo.

I went back for more whenever I lost. And when I went back, I lost again. My heart was always in pain.

Even so, always going back for more taught me that it was the only way to make the impossible possible.

And ...

No matter how many walls you break, a bigger one is always waiting beyond it.

No matter how many impossibilities you overcome, you're always hit with an even bigger impossibility.

It can't wait for tomorrow, nor the next match.

Now, from this very moment—I will challenge the *best*!

My eyes glued to the board, I ask the match recorder, "Time so far?"

"You have used thirty-four minutes."

"What's left?"

"Twenty-five minutes and thirty-four seconds."

— Will I make it?

My opponent has one thousand hours of research. What's more, he has results found with the Meijin and an A League 8-*dan* working on his side.

Can I overturn their conclusion—in only twenty-five minutes and thirty-four seconds?

This C-2 pro with less than two years of experience is going to try.

It might be reckless. Maybe even audacious.

Because seriously, I'm so much weaker than those two.

I'm weak, but—I *am* the *Ryuo*!!

"..... Haaa"

I lift my head and draw in a deep breath to get as much oxygen into my lungs and brain as possible.

Clench both fists.

Then, I put them down on the *tatami* mat to support all my weight as I lean over the board.

Looking straight at it—looking only at the Shogi board.

The time when I told my apprentice to not look away from the hard stuff and keep going forward pops into my head.

I bet that Ai is watching this match on her smartphone at her school right now.

She's not the only one.

Maestro, Big Sis too Even Mio and Keika might be watching this.

But, most of all—.

"..... The Meijin"

The one I will have to face someday.

The one I'm trying to surpass right now.

—The Meijin is watching RIGHT NOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOW!!

“!!!”

I bite my lip hard enough to taste blood, the pain becoming the fuel I needed to send my *reading* speed into overdrive.

I saw my King die so many times in my head.

Some sequences resulted in an instant death, others resulted in a slow, tormented demise.

The more I read, the more death I saw, the situation becoming bleaker by the second.



“GHAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!!!”

All that death is so heavy, my spirit is about to shatter. All the different possibilities that are unfolding before my eyes I’m being crushed by Shogi’s infinite possibilities. How many are left? Trillions? Quadrillions? No amount of regretting my recklessness will fix the new death for me at the end of the next sequence.

Read.

Even so, read.

Again.

Again. Again.

Againagainagain.

Againagainagainagainagainagainagainagainagainagainagainagainagainagainagain
however many times it takes.

To the ten billionth attempt and the quadrillionth death.

To what lies beyond.

—————There was only one place left.

“..... Found it.”

“Huh?”

If it hadn’t been for Mr. Natagiri’s response, I don’t think I would’ve realized I said something. It was probably along the lines of: *Found it*.

My sense of time gone, I look up and glance over at the clock.

I’ve used twenty-five minutes and thirty-four seconds.

“Kuzuryu-sensei. Your allotted waiting time has expired, so please proceed

with one-minute Shogi,” I hear the match recorder say, but it doesn’t faze me one bit.

I don’t need time anymore.

“Understood,” I answer him and make my move at the same time.

“Hm?! Moving there means Oh, I see. You’re going to put my King in check with your next move”

Mr. Natagiri analyzes what I did and says, *“But it’s pointless.”*

With that, he deploys a Lance pointed directly at my King.

I’ll win if I attack now rather than defend.

He had to believe that, putting that Lance down so assertively.

“.....”

I follow suit, putting Mr. Natagiri’s King in check rather than reinforcing my defense the instant he pulls his hand away from the board.

Watching my speed and demeanor, he looks up at me and says, “..... Alright. Setting the scene, are you?”

He smiles.

“But you have nothing to be ashamed of. You are not weak in any sense of the word, Yaichi. It’s just that the Gokigen Central Rook strategy itself has collapsed”

Then Mr. Natagiri slaps a Rook down next to my King to put me in check for the first time.

I move my King out of the way.

Next, he deploys a Knight to put me in check for the second time.

I take that Knight with a Pawn to survive another turn.

He deploys another piece, a Bishop, to put me in check for the third turn in a

row.

Here.

I reach for my piece stand.

Mr. Natagiri must've misunderstood what I was about to do, probably thinking this was when I was going to throw in the towel because he has a sympathetic smile on his face.

"Trust me, Ranging Rook and you don't go together. Next time, I'd love to go against that fantastic Move Loss Bishop Exchange of yours. And I'm sure that the Meijin would enjoy——."

But there wasn't a shred of quit in me. The reason I put my hand on my piece stand was to get one to block his attack, an *aigoma*.

The piece I deployed on the board without a moment's hesitation was—a *Silver*.

"..... Silver?"

Mr. Natagiri's smile practically flies off his lips.

"You're blocking with a Silver? A Silver? You have a Knight right there"

Normally, you'd want to use the weakest piece you have for an *aigoma*. Chances are the opponent will take it, so it'd be better to keep the stronger piece than let your opponent have it.

However——this is *the only option*.

Mr. Natagiri took the Silver, as anyone would, and put me in check for the fourth time.

I block it again, and he presses the attack to put me in check yet again, the fifth time.

Here too.

I make my move again with no hesitation. Another *aigoma*.

“Again Silver?”

The meaning behind my *aigoma* starts to dawn on him——.

“..... It couldn’t be.”

For the first time, he’s figured out exactly why I deployed *two Silvers in a row*.

“That can’t be. No, that’s not No, no, no?!”

Yes.

That’s exactly it.

The two Silvers I played——.

“..... *Gentei aigoma*? Both of them? And t-two in a row? No?! It-it just can’t be *and one more*?!”

Jaw hanging open, Mr. Natagiri figured it all out.

Figured out that he’d already lost.

In a situation where he should win nine hundred ninety-nine times out of a hundred, nine hundred ninety-nine thousand nine hundred ninety-nine times out of a million, there was just one One way that he could lose out of a quadrillion possibilities.

“Th This can’t be Did it, really happen? R-Really?”

I get why he’s so shocked.

That doesn’t change the fact it just happened.

There was one hole so tiny that it couldn’t even be seen by a microscope in his almighty absolutely perfect wall. One hole smaller than a miracle.

And the wall came down.

I, broke the wall.

“T-That Should be impossible”

Mr. Natagiri’s fingers tremble, his body swaying as he puts my King in check for the sixth, seventh, eighth, and ninth times.

I don’t think he was holding out because losing hurt too much, it was more because he couldn’t believe his eyes.

But this match was already over. The board, that had been burning with intensity just a moment ago, showed a much cooler conclusion.

There was only one answer.

—————Surrender.

Once Mr. Natagiri saw my King evade check for the tenth time in a row, he weakly put his hand on his piece stand and lowered his head in a silent bow. If he hadn’t put his hand down, he probably would’ve fallen over.

I say nothing but return the polite gesture.

“.....”

Mr. Natagiri, the recordkeeper and the journalist ... everyone in the room isn’t saying a word.

The air is heavy with disbelief that goes beyond winning and losing.

What just took place on the board was so rare that even astrologers wouldn’t have predicted it. Everyone is feeling the impact, the echoes fill the room Overwhelmed by Shogi’s depth.

The chances of a *gentei aigoma* showing up in a real match are slim to none.

For there to be two in a row, that happens once in a decade if even that.

It was a miracle that I found a sequence to take the win However, that

means that Mr. Natagiri's research was so thorough, *so perfect that it took a miracle* to overturn.

"..... Was there anything, I could've done?" he asks after throwing in the towel.

Mr. Natagiri is fighting to keep his voice steady, his eyes glued to the board as he speaks.

"Here——."

I rearrange the pieces, rewinding our match to the point where he deployed a Knight behind his King, move fifty-seven.

"If you'd put down a Lance instead of the Knight."

"Ah!"

It sure didn't take him long to understand. He starts to reach for the piece, almost like a reflex, but pulls his hand back like he thought better of it.

That hand was shaking, just a little bit.

At first, I thought it was because he was hurting. But on second thought, that pain is exactly why he's so good. It's his strength.

Having other players look down on him day after day, saying he had *no talent*, he turned to that pain for strength. That smooth smile is just an act. There's no one in the pro Shogi world who wouldn't feel pain getting treated like that. But his desire to win never went away, not for a single day. That's why he could work harder, put more effort into research than anyone else. And not just regular effort ... extraordinary effort.

By sitting across the board from him, by seeing the depths of his research in action, I got a sense of his devotion to Shogi I got to experience all of those hours firsthand.

And, I learned.

Just like I'd hit so many walls, I learned that he had overcome his own. That he'd faced so many more impossibilities than I have. That he's more passionate, more severe, more muddy and stubborn A genuine Shogi player.

I just sit here, my whole body numb with happiness for a few moments when Mr. Natagiri looks over at me and says, "... Would you mind answering my earlier question?"

"Come again?"

"About your Ranging Rook preparation. How much did you do?"

"Two weeks"

"Huh?!"

His eyes flew open in surprise before he burst out laughing, leaning backward to support himself.

"Ha-ha! Two weeks! Only two weeks! Well, I'll be! Prodigies really are different! Normal people wouldn't try a new strategy against an All-Rounder with only two weeks of preparation! Especially against someone they'd lost to three times in a row?! Whew, the things prodigies come in with! It's no wonder they win!"

"..... Sorry?"

"No, no. It's fine. I just can't get over the two weeks bit"

Hah! He laughs again and continues with the same gusto.

"..... My promotion to A League must've gone to my head. Part of me thought that no one could disprove the results that the Meijin and I found together, that I would win just by using it. But I was mistaken There is another, more important weapon."

That said, Natagiri 8-*dan* straightens his posture, lowers his head in a deep bow and says, one more time in a loud, clear voice, "I've lost this match Thank you."

I was so happy to finally win against him.

🏠 THE ELEPHANT AND THE ANT

A miracle.

A miracle happened right before my eyes.

“How what? What in the world What just happened?”

Even though Natagiri 8-*dan* accepting defeat was displayed on the monitor, I couldn't believe it at first.

Yaichi's King was as good as gone. It should have been an easy checkmate.

Even I could've won in that position.

That's how far behind he was. But if I were in Yaichi's shoes, I would've given up long before then.

But it was Yaichi who emerged victorious.

Surviving ten checks in a row is amazing enough but The earth-shattering truth came to light as I listened to their review session.

“Silver, Silver, Bishop Three consecutive *gentei aigoma*?”

“Yes.”

Unlike me, it sounds like Ginko figured out what was happening during the match. She starts explaining it with no hesitation or surprise on her face whatsoever.

“Using the Bishop to block doesn't happen in real matches, but Yaichi read that too. Without a doubt.”

“F From when?”

“Probably, when the Knight was deployed at 5 Eight.”

“5 Eight Knight?”

At first, I didn't understand what turn she was talking about.

Once I saw it—my blood ran cold.

"You're joking You have to be joking?! He accurately read thirty turns ahead from move fifty-seven?! That's impossible!!"

"Then the three consecutive *gentei aigoma* were just luck and coincidence? Do you seriously think so?"

".....! B-But"

No matter how I tried to prove my point, the words kept getting stuck in my throat.

Gentei aigoma, a situation that literally means *use any other piece to block and you'll lose*.

Surviving one means that the player *read there was only one possible answer*.

Yaichi pulled it off *three times in a row*.

That's no coincidence Luck and gut feelings can't do that either.

He had to have read it.

Read it perfectly.

Sure, it was the late game but There were an overwhelming number of sequences that could have played out.

Too many for a person made of flesh and bone to think all the way through. That's something new computers armed with the latest technology would need days to do, an astronomical number of possibilities

"..... Hundreds of millions? Thousands of Trillions"

"More than that. He went further. Yaichi went beyond all of that," Ginko said, still invigorated.

"And he arrived at the one and only correct answer. Found a place that would

take us a thousand years to find, and in less than thirty minutes.”

“Th That’s just”

Having it spelled out for me didn’t help because my brain refused to accept it.

Everyone knows that you use your weakest piece for an *aigoma*, it’s common sense You read what will play out by deploying a Pawn or a Lance.

That’s why people don’t use a Silver or a Bishop in that situation The thought would never cross their minds.

A miracle——No, Yaichi just outdid a miracle by doing something impossible.

That’s That’s

“Not Not human

“Told you, didn’t I?” Ginko says matter-of-factly as she reveals her younger brother apprentice’s true identity. “He’s a Shogi Martian.”

..... Even after Ginko went home, I stayed in that room by myself, feeling defeated.

I’m sure, absolutely positive, that other professional players, Women’s League players and Sub League members who saw that match feel the same way.

Their spirits breaking just because someone with that level of talent is in their midst.

“But It’s not Yaichi’s fault. Even Ai

It’s only natural. An elephant doesn’t feel anything for the ants crushed under its feet when it walks. It’s not evil and hasn’t done anything wrong. The elephant had no way of knowing the ants were ever there.

But the elephant crushes the ants like they’re nothing at all.

The ants, however, fear the elephant. Respect it and are terrified of it
Then come to hate it.

“..... So petty ...”

The whole thing is so trivial it makes me want to cry. Me, I’m just a little ant
with a pile of notebooks stacked up in the corner of a room.

“This pile, these notebooks are my weapons? Ginko, that was cruel——.”

It hit me just as I heard myself say it.

This pile of notebooks that I started writing when I first decided to join the
Women’s League was now thicker than a Shogi board with legs was tall.

Each one by itself is just a small, flimsy thing But seven years of them
stacked up together, they’ve become roughly the size of an elephant’s foot.

“My weapons”

I reach for the pile of old notebooks stacked up in the corner, grab the top
one and open to the first page.

It’s a match record, one that brings back memories of days that were filled
with hope.

It was an awkward match, Shogi like how a toddler tries to walk But there
was joy in each move, an unchained imagination at work with each passing
turn.

“Did I ... actually play like this?”

Seeing a part of myself that I’d completely forgotten, and oddly enjoying it, I
turn the page excited to see what *me* I would meet next.

The sun peeked in through the window before I knew it, but I still wanted to
see what was on the next page.

Even when the next night fell.

And when the sun rose again.

■ FATHER AND DAUGHTER

Like taking hold of the latest missile and whacking your opponent over the head with it like a baseball bat—

That's how Mr. Oishi described today's match.

"Not even a shred of finesse. Here I gave you this beautiful missile called Ranging Rook, but for some reason you only know how to use brute force."

"S-Sorry"

"What were you doing here the past two weeks? Come just for a soak in the bath?"

..... I've got nothing.

I went back to the Gokigen Bathhouse once the match ended—and now I'm getting lectured by the Maestro himself in his fancy, jazz bar-esque classroom.

I may have won by finding a miracle sequence in the end, but it's not like I was trying to do that from the start. In terms of both research and worldliness, Mr. Natagiri was clearly better than me. All I did was pick up the victory that happened to fall through his fingers.

That being said, the Internet is going nuts. Even the message boards that always rip on me now have Yaichi Kuzuryu 8-*dan* up on a pedestal and are singing my praises.

It goes something like this.

"Ryuo PowerHOUUUUUUUSE!!"

"Three *gentei aigoma* in a row!? Talk about a miracle!"

"Utterly destroys an A League player his first time playing Ranging Rook The guy's a genius."

“Now that’s the real Dragon King.”

“Don’cha think *Kuzuryu*’s wakin’ up recently?”

“Agreed. It’s like he leveled up after taking an apprentice.”

“You hear his second apprentice is a grade schooler as well?”

“That leveled up too.”

Something tells me my reputation is spiraling even further into the abyss, but I’m too happy to care. Saving that thread for sure!

“Heh≡ Hehe≡”

“I’m giving you a piece of my mind here. Wipe that smirk off your face, it’s giving me the creeps

“S-Sorry

“..... I’ll be honest with you——,” says Mr. Oishi, poking a copy of my match record with his finger.

“I didn’t think you could beat Natagiri. No matter how talented you are, I didn’t think there was a chance in hell your floundering Ranging Rook could break Natagiri and the Meijin’s joint research. However, it seems you are far more talented than I ever imagined. You live up to your title, Ryuo.”

“..... Talent ... is important. Putting in effort is important too. But——

“But?”

“.....”

I look over into the corner of the classroom.

My tiny apprentice is over there, completely caught up in a game of Shogi with one of the classroom’s customers.

“There’s something even more important than talent and effort. I think I won today because I found it.”

“Oh? So, what would that be?”

“Desire.”

“.....!”

Mr. Oishi’s eyes open a little wider with surprise.

My thoughts are on Ai playing Shogi in the corner. I say with as much conviction as I can muster, “Talent is a big part of it. But only *dreams* and *desire* can push that talent to its full potential. That’s why people can put in the effort and why kids get better so quickly.”

My desire to be like Master Kiyotaki led me to become a pro player.

My admiration for Chairman Tsukimitsu drove me to become a Move Loss Bishop Exchange specialist.

And now—my dream to be like the Meijin makes me want to be the *best*.

“The more experience we get, the more of the real world we know, we start hiding from it. Scared to lose, worried about what people around us think, we try to project a certain image of ourselves We stop trying to challenge the impossible. But I think it might be better to set our sights on what we want and just go for it, without all the fuss. That’s how I feel.”

Whether we can do it or not doesn’t matter.

Because, for people like us who can’t live without Shogi Once we know that, we’ve got no choice but to aim for the top.

“I’m going to keep playing Ranging Rook. I’ll play Static and Ranging to become an All-Rounder I’ll show everyone I want to be like the Meijin with what I can do on the board. No matter how many people tell me I can’t, no matter how many times I get called *kuzu-trash*, I’m sure this feeling I have is right.”

Mr. Natagiri’s Shogi taught me that lesson. It’s not your research results that are important. It’s having an end goal in mind, a reason to keep researching

that becomes your greatest weapon. To keep challenging that next wall.

“.....”

Mr. Oishi lets out a long sigh and scratches his head, pinning his hair behind his ears.

“..... So Natagiri and I aren’t even on the radar. Smart aleck brat So, this is a prodigy.”

“Come again?”

“So, this is Osaka’s biggest bonehead is what I said.”

Huuuh——?

“But yeah, never thought Natagiri and the Meijin would’ve spent that much time researching Extreme Rapid Battle. Might be a good idea to put Goki-Central on the back burner for a while.”

“But, Goki-Central is the ace up your sleeve, isn’t it? Are you seriously not going to use it during placement matches?”

“I’ll use Side Pawn Capture.”

“What? That’s Static Rook——.”

“Side Pawn Capture with 8 Five Rook.”

“Okay.”

“Think about it and rotate ninety degrees.”

“.....?”

I turn my mental Shogi board on its side.



歩: PAWN 香: LANCE 銀: SILVER
角: BISHOP 桂: KNIGHT 金: GOLD
飛: ROOK 玉: KING

“See? That’s Central Rook.”

I swear, this guy’s got a screw loose somewhere.

Just as I was trying to get my head around the Maestro’s idea, I heard, “Um.”

Asuka—not really sure when she came up to the classroom—gets Mr. Oishi’s attention.

“The bathhouse is closed

“Ah. Thanks. Yaichi’ll do the cleaning, so you can head out.”

..... Fine by me. It’s not like I’ll get much sleep the night after a match like that anyway.

Maybe I should ask her to take Ai over to the main building too. We can spend the night there and then go back to the apartment early tomorrow morning.

My train of thought made it that far when I noticed the awkwardness in the air.

Asuka is still standing next to us and doesn’t show any signs of moving.

“What is it?” asks Mr. Oishi in a sharp tone.

“I-I, umm I want here

Flinch! I can tell she’s scared out of her wits, but Asuka speaks up clearer than usual.

“I’ll stay to learn Shogi from Yaichi.”

“

Neither Mr. Oishi nor I said anything right away.

But he didn’t look surprised ... More like a moment that needed to happen had arrived.

“I thought I told you to give up on Shogi.”

“..... You won’t be teaching me, Father.”

I didn’t say I would teach you either

Ignoring my predicament, father and daughter lock eyes.

“.....!”

The first one to look away was Asuka.

However, she didn’t budge. Staring at the floor, she bit her lip in an attempt to overcome her father’s overwhelming aura.

“..... It looks like words aren’t enough to get through to you,” he said, sounding annoyed.

“Hey, Ai! Could you come here a minute?”

“Whah?”

Her game having just ended, Ai makes a hurried bow to her opponent before coming over to us with a very confused look on her face.

Probably the biggest reason why Mr. Oishi taught the two of us how to play Ranging Rook It wasn’t to help me improve, or to help Ranging Rook gain

popularity ... It was *to break Asuka's spirit*.

People's spirits break before the battle begins in the face of tremendous talent. All they can think of is: *There's no way I can win*, and give up before trying.

Mr. Oishi wanted to use Ai's talent to snap Asuka's spirit like a toothpick. To make her abandon Shogi altogether.

But it seems to have had the opposite effect.

For me personally, I kind of like it when people take a hard stance. Especially when it's someone as quiet and reserved as Asuka who refuses to take no for an answer where Shogi is involved Doesn't that just tug at the heartstrings?!

"Hey."

"Owch?!"

The Maestro smacks me across the face. Why?!

"..... Don't look at my daughter with bedroom eyes."

H-How sharp is this guy!?

"..... I know, I know I don't have talent"

She apparently missed what just happened, because Asuka is squeezing the daylights out of her gym shorts while forcing words out of her mouth and staring at the floor.

"W-What you're trying to tell me, Father ... I understand what you're saying through Ai. I get it That That's why——."

Asuka looks up.

Then yells at the top of her lungs.

"If I win against Ai I want, I want you to let me learn Shogi again!!"

🏠 CENTRAL ROOK VS. CENTRAL ROOK

“D-Do I have to play against, Asuka

“Would you do that for me, Ai?”

Ai looks up at me, hoping I can get her out of this situation once Mr. Oishi asks.

I know exactly how she feels.

She heard the conversation. She knows that if she wins, then Asuka will be forced to give up playing Shogi. I’m sure that Ai can tell how much Asuka loves to play.

My apprentice was in a similar position when she played against Big Sis during the Practice League entrance test. I don’t blame her for being sympathetic to Asuka’s situation. But——.

“M-Master

“Ai

My apprentice is pleading for help, but I say,

“Ai. You’re going to have to be the one to put an end to Keika’s hopes and dreams.”

“Kei ka’s?”

Ai was shocked to hear that name came up out of nowhere, but I keep going.

“I had a look at the recent Practice League matches

“.....!”

As she gulps down the air in her throat, her face turns paler by the second.

Ai shivers at the thought of becoming Keika's "executioner." If Keika drops down to D at the age of twenty-five, there's a good chance she'll quit the Practice League altogether

"If you can't play against Asuka right now, there's no way you'll be able to go against Keika. Am I wrong?"

"....."

"Everyone draws the line somewhere. Everyone wants to win. If you're willing to give up that win because you feel sorry for your opponent, you don't have to play them at all. You can stay an amateur and have fun playing Shogi as a hobby. Yes?"

I was very aware of the customers in the classroom around us with each word.

It's not necessary to work as a Shogi player. Amateurs can get very, very good and they don't have to worry about wins and losses. They're free to play for the fun of it. That's respectable Shogi, the way it should be.

"This is your decision. You make it."

"I I-I"

Although she sounds lightheaded, Ai clenches her hands into fists just like Asuka and makes her choice.

"..... will play!"

The stage was set immediately.

The remaining customers finished up their games and helped set up a small arena in the middle of the classroom. Then everyone stood in a ring around Ai and Asuka to get a good view of the match.

They did a piece flip, and Ai won the first move.

“When you’re ready!”

“W-When you’re ready!”

Exchanging bows, the two start moving pieces with purpose.

Once the formations on the board became clear, everyone’s eyes were open wide.

““! Ah———*Ainakabisha?!’”*”

Yep.

Asuka chose to go up against Ai’s Central Rook with Gokigen Central Rook.

Central Rook vs. Central Rook——.

Ai choosing to play Central Rook on offense was a surprise, but even more surprising was that Asuka chose to play the same style on defense.

“Asuka. Are you taking this match seriously or not?”

Says the Maestro in a low voice. There was quite a bit of anger in there too.

When both players use the same strategy, the one who went first has the advantage. That’s why.

There are some exceptions, like the Move Loss Bishop Exchange, but even a specialist like myself will only have a slight advantage as long as I don’t mess up.

Basically, Asuka chose to fight with a disadvantage by going with Central Rook. It’s that naiveté that got under Mr. Oishi’s skin.

“B-But But”

He made his feelings as clear as day, but Asuka rose to meet him with just as much intensity.

“But I——I love Central Rook!!”

“Well said.”

I couldn’t help but nod at her response.

She's saying that her love for Shogi is stronger: she's played more matches, practiced more, and thought about Shogi every single day.

And that that feeling will lead to victory in the end.

In order to push your opponent out of the way ... to make fighting for what you love right and just, you need to be more passionate than anyone else.

—Passionate about Shogi.

—To love Shogi with all your heart!

So, Ai. Pick up on that already I'm begging you!!

"?! Ugh Kh!!"

Ai's having a hard time against Asuka's Gokigen Central Rook, and it's not getting any easier.

Trying to play *aifuribisha*, Ranging vs. Ranging, with almost no experience like Ai, everything is uncharted territory. Having the first move gives her an advantage, but it's useless if she doesn't know how to use it.

But, even more than that—.

"..... Nice!"

Asuka's read-and-react playing style is so spot-on I couldn't help but comment on it.

The thing about *ainakabisha*, two Central Rooks playing against each other, is that standards don't really exist and it can become a contest of strength at the drop of a hat.

But that didn't slow Asuka down at all. Her movements were so smooth it was almost like—.

"..... Hey, Asuka. How come you can read *ainakabisha* like this ...?"

She didn't even look up from the board to answer her father's question.

“..... I learned by playing people here at the classroom.”

“Is that sooo?”

The Maestro glares around the room at all the customers doing their best not to look him in the eye.

After a few moments, they must’ve figured out there was no point trying to hide this secret because they start fessing up one by one.

“..... Come on, Maestro. How could I ever say no to Asuka?”

“Got that right. Plus, it was a chance to get another Ranging Rook party member ... Not only that, to get a young lady to join! That only happens once in a blue moon. I won’t pass that up.”

“The Rook may slide, but never slide a lady! That’s our bread an’ butter, how many times have ya said so?!”

Yeah, and *for sure*, and a whole lot more *yeses* start coming from the crowd as they side with Asuka.

Mr. Oishi holds his head in his hands.

“You Ranging Rooker’s are nuts ... You guys really can’t help yourselves, I swear!”

He groans but looks a little happy too.

Thinking back on it, he’s been in a good mood ever since we showed up.

Was some part of him still holding out hope that his daughter would play Shogi?

“I don’t think I could ever work as a Shogi player! I don’t want to join the Women’s League! I-I just I just love Shogi!!”

Ai shrinks back in the face of Asuka’s emotional surge. Then she went off like a bomb.

“That’s why I want to play against you, Father! That’s why I want to play with

the customers! It doesn't matter if I can't be really good, if a little girl passes me up, I don't care! Because All because I ... I love Shogi so much!!”

Gokigen Central Rook is strange as far as strategies go.

Having an emotional state, *happy-go-lucky* in the name in the first place is strange.

There are a few explanations for it, but the one I like best is: *playing Gokigen Central Rook makes you feel happy-go-lucky*.

Strange as it sounds, people who know nothing about Shogi tend to naturally play this way. So, Central Rook is like a human instinct and using Gokigen Central Rook can make someone feel happy whenever they play. Or so they say.

I know it sounds crazy but watching Asuka right now, doesn't it sound crazy enough to be true?

“I love Shogi! I love Central Rook! A wallflower like me, always quietly standing off to the side ... If I play with a Rook in the middle, even I can be straightforward, I can express myself! No matter what anyone says, no matter what my opponent plays, I will always meet them with Central Rook!! I'll keep fighting with Gokigen Central Rook as long as I live!!”

All of her built-up emotions came out in one burst, a particularly loud one for Asuka.

“Central Rook is——my way forward!!”

Just as she said.

Asuka advances her central Rook straight down the middle of the board, tearing a path to Ai’s King wide open!

“.....?!”

Ai wasn’t expecting to be attacked that turn, and her formation took heavy damage as a result. She’s being overwhelmed by Asuka’s intensity.

That’s when, “Dahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!!”

Asuka’s worldliness erupted!

Once the Rook plunged through the outer layer of defense, she deploys piece after piece right into the middle of Ai’s formation and tears apart.

It’s a similar yet different version of her father’s worldliness. A clumsy, brutish finesse. But—.

“..... Pretty intense,” the Maestro says under his breath and I nod in agreement.

Now backed into a corner, Ai——.

“Take that and ugh.”



Her internal struggle: the feelings holding her back finally fell out of the way as Ai's offensive instincts started to come out.

“Take that one here That one take that one, here, here, herehereherehereherehere—.”

The switch finally flipped. Ai starts rocking back and forth to establish a reading rhythm.

Now she's in the zone.

“Hereherehereherehereherehereherehereherehere-
hereherehereherehereherehereherehereherehere-
herehere_____.”

“.....?! U-Umm Ummm Ai?”

Asuka, who'd been on an all-out offensive, starts feeling pressure from this grade school girl's sudden transformation.

Then——.

“..... I ... lost ...”

One hour later.

The one who threw in the towel—was Ai.

“Th ... Thank you

"Haa, haaa," Asuka manages to say with her shoulders heaving up and down.

Ai didn't go easy on her. Watching the whole match from beside the board, I could tell.

At the same time, that wasn't her best either.

Ai's heart hasn't completely healed yet, her spirit wasn't in it and that put the brakes on. Knowing that winning the match would make life hard for her

opponent made her think twice and kept her from pulling out all the stops. On top of all that, Asuka's left-handed high-speed playing style might've thrown her for a loop too.

But most of all Asuka played an excellent match.

Maintaining the lead she stole in the early game, Asuka kept up enough pressure in the late game to keep her formation together and emerge victorious in the end. I'd be willing to bet that if Asuka and Ai played one hundred matches, Ai would win ninety-nine of them. The fact that this happened to be the one is proof that Asuka wanted it more.

Seeing her play, I didn't feel any talent in Asuka's moves.

But that's exactly why this game was so significant. At least, I think so.

With everything on her plate, from school to helping out at the bathhouse to practicing in the classroom, building up this much Shogi knowledge behind her parents' backs proves she was



willing to do whatever it took.

And most of all, her love of Shogi is sincere.

“I I won”

Emotions getting the better of her, Asuka looks up at her father with tears in her eyes. “F-Father May ... I play, Shogi?”

Mr. Oishi, who quietly watched over his daughter the whole match, says, “..... Asuka. Say you started learning Shogi, what would you want to do?”

“If, I can I’d like to get the qualifications to become a promotion instructor and work alongside you in the classroom Not just doing the little things, but I want to teach customers”

Promotion instructors are teachers who have been officially approved by the association to teach others.

Someone with that title can get their classroom approved by the association, hold an official rank and get certified as well.

There’s a lot that needs to happen to get that qualification, but the main one for women is having an amateur *2-dan* rank or better.

Judging by the match I just saw, I’d say that it’s a realistic goal for Asuka.

“The business that you that you and all these nice people have built, I want to help protect it Not just the classroom, I want to be able to run the bathhouse by myself as well That way you won’t have to worry about it and can focus on Shogi. That’s m-my dream Father. So, please”

“Your dream, huh”

Mr. Oishi echoes Asuka’s words.

“You think you can accomplish that with those pitiful Ranging Rook skills?”

“Huh?” Asuka winces at her father’s retort.

“Make no mistake, Asuka. You won today because Ai isn’t used to playing

Ranging Rook, not because your Gokigen was anything to write home about. Your movements were heavy, lacked any kind of precision, and I can't let other people see a late game like that and think of it as Ranging Rook. That would hurt our reputation. So——."

".....!"

Stop playing here and now.

Asuka braces for the words she thinks she's about to hear.

But——Mr. Oishi says something else.

"I'll teach you myself."

"..... Are you ... sure that's okay?"

"Doesn't matter if I say it's okay or not, does it? You'll just do it anyway: play Shogi."

"....." The customers in the room have been closely following the conversation back and forth. Now that it took this unexpected turn, a few whistle their approval. More join in. What a great group of guys.

"Uh, umm I I!"

"And if I let Yaichi teach you, your Ranging Rook'll only get worse."

Looks like Asuka doesn't know what to say, but desperately searches for something.

"I-I'll do the best I can ... I know I'm not talented ... and that I'll never be as good as you, Father ... But if you'll work with me I promise I can do it!"

"Is that so? You'll just end up wanting to join the Practice League anyway."

"W-why?"

The *Worldly Maestro* answers his daughter with an exhausted look in his eyes, "Because you're my girl."

“..... Daddy!!”

Massive tears start flowing out of her eyes.

I’m pretty sure that Mr. Oishi would’ve offered to teach her even if she’d lost but I think that’s better left unsaid.

Asuka said what she wanted and opened the way with Central Rook: a path that leads to her dream.

Seeing that Shogi firsthand, Ai quietly asks, “Asuka and Oishi-*sensei* ... do you think they’ll be okay?”

“They’ve bonded over Gokigen Central Rook.”

I pat my concerned apprentice’s head and smile from ear to ear.

“Of course. It’ll be a happy ending.”

RECORD 5

KEIKA KIYOTAKI

DATE OF BIRTH: NOVEMBER 9TH (25)
HOMETOWN: OSAKA
MASTER: KOUSUKE KIYOTAKI 9-DAN
RANKING: PRACTICE LEAGUE C-2
COOKING SPECIALTIES: OKONOMIYAKI
BEEF AND EGGS ON RICE

MESSAGE

"I'll be on my way."

The Practice League meets today.

I got up early this morning like I always do, got breakfast ready, made and packed my own lunch and put Dad's lunch in the fridge. Once everything was finished, I went to say goodbye.

Dad has eaten breakfast, but he doesn't look up from the newspaper.

Neither of us make eye contact.

These long, quiet moments when all I hear is his breathing have gone on for months, even years. It's normal at this point.

We hardly ever talk about Shogi anymore since Yaichi and Ginko moved out. And when we do, it's always about managing the classroom and never about my results. We avoid that on purpose.

Could it be——?

Days like this one have been eating away at me all this time.

"I put your lunch in the refrigerator. Make sure to warm it up first."

"Uh-huh"

"Also, the homeowner's association should be around to collect dues, and it's almost time to pay for the newspaper subscription. I put the money in envelopes and set them on the shelf next to the door. Just give them the right envelope when they come by."

"Uh-huh"

"And, one more thing——."

I straighten my posture to look him square in the eyes, even though he hasn't

looked up from the paper and say, “If I can’t get the B off my record at today’s meeting I will quit the Practice League.”

“.....?”

Dad slowly looks up at me.

How many years has it been since we made eye contact like this?

Seeing my dad straight on for the first time in forever, I can’t believe how much he has aged. The wrinkles that line his face mark the past years like tree rings, so much so that it’s hard to believe it’s actually him.

It was all I could do to keep my gaze from falling as I continued. “I’m sorry for being so selfish. I’m already twenty-five, but still ask you to do so much to look after me. I realize it’s childish to make such an important decision on my own, and for that I’m truly sorry.”

I’ve rehearsed these words in my head so many times, but even though I’m finally saying them out loud there’s a part of me that doesn’t know if I’m doing the right thing. It could just be me trying to run away.

“However, if I’m not willing to put this much on the line I don’t think I’ll be able to do it at all.”

“Keika——.”

“I’ll see you tonight.”

I make a quick bow to cut him off and leave home.

A plain, ordinary letter was what made me decide to call it quits.

That letter was in one of the notebooks from before I joined the Practice League, before I had my sights set on becoming a Women’s League player ... from when I was in elementary school, when Dad forced me to play Shogi. A

notebook so old I forgot it even existed.

The writer was me, when I was ten.

The letter, which began with the heading: *To Twenty-Year-Old Me*, talked about how difficult it was to have Dad as my Master and that studying Shogi every day was starting to get me. But it also said my dream was to join the Women's League and to work alongside my father playing Shogi. Such a childish dream, but the words were so blunt that each one stung.

So, twenty-year-old me. Did my dream come true?

"..... I'm sorry. None of it came true," I whisper to myself on my walk to the association, now a twenty-five-year-old woman.

That dream didn't come true.

What's worse, I'd forgotten how I felt when I was ten. I'd forgotten what it was like to follow a dream purely because I wanted to live it.

If ten-year-old me could have seen back then the woman she has become, she'd probably be shocked to see the sorry excuse for a human being she would turn into.

That dream didn't come true. The dream that I had when I was ten.

"But I'll show you I haven't given up."

I step inside the association and walk right past the friendly lady who works at the gift shop and the security guard who I always chat with when I have spare time, going directly to the arena.

🏠 OFF-THE-BOARD TACTICS

“..... What are you doing?”

“Woah!!”

The Practice League is in session.

I was peeking in at their opening lecture on strategy before the matches got underway when a voice from out of nowhere almost made me jump out of my skin.

My second apprentice is glaring down at me, her eyes as cold as ice.

“Ai! D-Don’t scare me like that!”

“I’m the one who’s scared. Scared that someone might see one of the top Shogi players in the world sneaking around a room full of children like some kind of pervert. As an apprentice, I can’t allow you to do such a thing, now can I?”

“Something is clearly wrong with you on a personal level.”

Even Akira, standing behind Ai, piles it on.

Yeesh I’d like to be in there with bells on but

But Keika said she didn’t want to see me, so what choice do I have? Hiding and peeking is the only way I can make sure she’s doing alright Then there’s Mio and Ai There’s a lot on my mind right now.

But I don’t think explaining all that to Ai Yashajin would be the best idea.

She’s a smart girl, so she’s probably picked up on it already. But I wanted to show her what family bonds look like by adding her as my apprentice.

Well, those bonds are in rough shape right now. And I can’t admit it! No way!

“So? What are you hiding?”

“You see Um I, I always keep a close eye on my apprentices like this! You had no idea, did you?!”

“That’s just gross.”

“D-Don’t put it like that~!”

I smile and look up at Ai.

I thought it was a nice smooth grin, but it must’ve been pretty rough because both Ai and Akira jump back like they saw something out of a horror movie.

“I know, okay? You’re not happy being a part of this family. But you still love your master, right? Don’t you? Don’t you?”

“Akira. File the necessary separation paperwork downstairs.”

“Huh?!”

Divorce!

“J-Just joking around!”

“Please let your face be the only joke.”

..... Little brat, saying whatever she wants because she knows she’s cute

“I should be the one asking you what you’re doing out here. You’re late, very late. Get in there and take a seat.”

“I will. Once you get out of my way.”

“..... Go right ahead.”

I step to the side and the young lady walks by with a *humph* strong enough to knock the dirt out of the door frame. She goes inside without a single glance at her Master.

“Pardon me.”

“Hm? Ms. Yashajin, you’re late,” the head of the Practice League, Yoshitsune Kuruno warns her, but Ai gives him an excuse without missing a beat.

“My apologies. I stopped to clean up some trash on my way here.”

“That’s all well and good, but do it on your own time.”

“I will.”

Ai makes a graceful bow, finds an open spot and sits down on her ankles. Meanwhile, the Master she called *some trash* is hunched over and depressed out in the hallway.

Since the lecture was pretty much over, Kuruno-sensei starts taking attendance.

Once he confirmed that everyone was there he said, “Hm. Now I will announce today’s matchups.”

Here it comes, the moment when we find out who will play against whom.

“.....!”

Glancing around the arena from my hiding spot, I see ... The air in that room is so tense it feels like a hawk just snatched a piece of my gut.

The mood is very different in the Practice League today.

The always bright and energetic Mio usually asks a boatload of questions during the lecture, her hand waves every few seconds. But today, she didn’t say a word the whole time. Instead, she just stared at the floor.

Her lack of energy seems to be weighing on Ayano too. She’s over in the corner, making herself small.

And Ai, she looks distracted, like she can’t get comfortable.

But Keika is the one at the center of the storm.

Keika, the oldest member of the Practice League, has thrown her friendly

persona out the window and is instead intimidating everyone around her with an intense aura.

And she's obviously doing it on purpose.

She usually helps the kids like a kind older sister and always has a smile on her face, but she hasn't said a word to anyone today. That look in her eyes, it's like she's saying, "Don't talk to me," without words.

That alone made the atmosphere in the Practice League feel like these moments were leading up to a duel to the death.

That's pretty much how it always is in the Sub League, where the members are older and literally have their futures on the line, but it almost never happens in the Practice League where most members are in elementary school.

Usually kids take their cues from how the adults are acting.

Each one of them looks a bit frightened, but can't figure out what's wrong with Keika Basically, Keika is controlling the air with an iron fist.

That being said, there is someone who hasn't been affected by it at all.

"Ms. Keika Kiyotaki and Ms. Ai Yashajin. Even match."

My second apprentice is set to play against her in today's first match, but she's just the same as always.

Her perfect record since entering the Practice League and extremely high confidence combine to make a mental barrier Well, that girl's got nerves like diamonds anyway. Even without her record, I don't think she'd feel a thing.

Then, her complete opposite——.

"Ms. Keika Kiyotaki and Ms. Ai Hinatsuru. Even match."

".....!!"

Ai was visibly shaken as soon as the day's second round was announced.

On the other hand, Keika didn't even flinch. It was like she knew this moment

had to come and she rose to meet it with a full head of steam.

..... At least, that's how it looks to me.

“With that, please prepare for the first match.”

Everyone stands up and moves around the room to find their opponent.

That's when the incident happened.

My first apprentice found who she was looking for, and the two of them started to go to the nearest board to set up the match. However, just as Ai was about to sit down, *plop* ... Keika sat down directly across from where she was about to land.

“?!”

Everyone flinched.

Keika chose the exact moment Ai was going to sit down to make her move No, just a second behind. Strange timing

Keika is clearly focused on Ai, trying to put pressure on her before their match. She's using off-the-board tactics, plain and simple.

“Ah uh?”

Ai is frozen in place, one knee down on the floor pillow.

Keika's already sitting on her ankles on the other side, back straight in perfect posture. She's there for the duration Basically saying, “You move,” with her body language.

“.....”

Seeing another open board close by, Ai gives a silent bow and moves away from Keika.

The whole thing only took a few seconds.

However, those seconds were so heavy and painful, they felt like an eternity.

“Ugh!”

I can't take this much tension. Feeling like I was going to puke at any second, I clamp my hands over my mouth and make a run for it.

MEMORIES OF PARADISE

“Cough! Haa, haa”

I dive into a toilet stall, praying to the porcelain god with a bunch of dry heaves.

W-Who’d have thought Keika’d have to go against both of the Ai’s in a row, right off the bat

The Practice League does four rounds of matches when they meet.

It goes without saying, but that first match is very important. Win that one, and you can get on a roll. But if you lose, the whole day can snowball out of control.

Keika went 1 and 3 after getting hit with a B Which means if she loses every match today, she’ll be one loss away from dropping down.

“I’m their Master so of course, I should be rooting for them. But”

I head down to the second-floor classroom to get something to rinse my dry throat when—.

I spot Big Sis sitting on her own in the back.

“..... Hello.”

“.....”

Drink in hand, I sit down on the opposite side of a board from her.

She doesn’t tell me to *move* or *go away*.

She just stares at the board, the pieces all lined up for a new match.

The classroom is pretty crowded, par for the course on Sundays. Children’s backpacks are piled up on the stage that’s normally used for lectures and for match analysis for big groups.

Snap! Snap! Pieces snapping against the boards, opponents quietly doing review sessions, chess clocks beeping, matchups being announced: it's all relaxing music to my ears.

Just like a baby being reassured by their mother's heartbeat, all the sounds of the classroom have a strange way of putting me at ease.

That's why both me and Big Sis come down to this classroom to relax even while heated matches are happening upstairs.

It's not to do anything specific.

We just take a seat in a chair and zone out and enjoy the sounds and the classroom atmosphere. It's calming.

That way, we can go back to a match that we thought was already lost feeling like *maybe I can still win*.

It might sound a little weird, but the mind and the body are connected with Shogi.

"....."

"....."

Neither of us says anything.

Ai Hinatsuru and Ai Yashajin, two girls I've trained myself, and Keika, who's surely gotten advice from Big Sis, are going head-to-head in today's Practice League matches. It's almost like they're fighting our battle for us.

—It's a sibling rivalry that's drawn in our whole Shogi family.

It might look like that from the outside.

Why are you getting in Keika's way? Big Sis might be thinking that about me right now. *Are you okay with her never joining the Women's League? Is Keika not important?*

She might want to blame the whole thing on me.

It might be because I'm a guy, and I always wanted Master's attention growing up.

On the other hand, Big Sis always went to Keika.

Back before the two of us joined the Sub League in the early years of elementary school, Big Sis was always at Keika's side when she came to this classroom.

Even when she was playing Shogi, she'd drag Keika all the way to her board, saying, "Watch this! Will you watch me?" hoping to show her that she could win.

She wanted Keika's praise when she won and her comfort when she lost.

One of the people in the classroom said one day, "You're always keeping Keika company, aren't you?"

I remember her answer, pointing to lined-up pieces at the same time.

"Gin is always next to the keima and kyousha!"

All those memories came back to me as I sat across from Big Sis without saying a word.

"Why, " Big Sis mutters after a short while.

She continues, her voice so quiet it disappears into the classroom noises around us.

"Why is fighting the only thing we can do?"

"Because——."

Because we're Shogi players.

Nah Not quite.

"Because——we're alive."

Choosing to live the life of a Shogi player I don't know what that feels like.

I don't remember my first game because it happened before I knew what anything was, and I kept playing as if Shogi was a natural part of growing up.

It wasn't a matter of choice.

Nothing other than Shogi mattered to me. I just wanted to get strong, fight against the next strong opponent, fight, fight, fight—.

Waiting for me at the end of those long battles was a career called *pro* and a position called *Ryuo*.

But this isn't where I want to be. It's not the end goal.

I'm merely in the middle of a war that I'll keep fighting until I die.

To me, playing Shogi is what it means to be alive. Without Shogi, I may as well be dead.

And Shogi itself is a fight.

That's why I'll keep fighting until this heart stops beating.

I've taken down many older members of the Sub League right here in the Kansai Shogi Association and in the Kanto Shogi Association as well.

Experienced members who were kind to me People who taught me how to play Shogi, who taught me how to be a match recorder, who played with me, bought me lunch, people who complimented my Shogi skills

After killing every single one of those kind people on a Shogi board, I am who I am today.

All those important people: I wounded their hearts, destroyed their futures, crushed their dreams ... And even still, I can't stop playing Shogi.

Even Big Sis wouldn't pull any punches once she's sitting down in front of a board. She wouldn't hesitate no matter who she's fighting.

Be it Keika, Master or me, she would slay us all with no regrets.

But this is different.

We're powerless right now. Neither of us has been in this position before, so we don't know how to react and end up looking away from the fight.

And even now, we cling to the one thing that's always been there for us since the beginning, a Shogi board.

Naniwa's Snow White without Shogi is just a normal third-year junior high school student with her own problems that she's powerless to solve.

"Big Sis. I think I'll head back up ..."

I can't keep looking away forever.

If the only thing I can do is see this through to the end, then it's my duty to do just that.

Because I'm a Master.

And I'm Keika's older brother apprentice.

"..... I'll stay ... a little longer ..."

Big Sis squeezes the words out.

"Just a little longer ... Right here ..."

That voice was the same as the crying little girl who wanted to keep playing Shogi way back when.

LOSS

Back at the arena, the first matches were just getting underway.

“.....” (sneak, sneak).

Careful not to let any Practice League members spot me, I steal some glances into the room to see how they're doing but I was discovered almost immediately.

By their supervisor of all people.

“Hm? What's wrong, Yaichi? Why are you acting so suspiciously?”

“Kh! Kuruno-*sensei*?! Shh! Shhhhh—!!”

“Stop lurking out here and come inside. Come on.”

“!! B-But, well It's just”

He must've figured out what was going on by the look on my face, because Kuruno-*sensei* said, “Hm Now I see. I thought that both Ai and Keika weren't their usual selves today This is a complicated situation. Members of the same Shogi family going against each other and the age limit is involved”

“..... Yes.”

“I cannot deny that Keika is between a rock and hard place. Her behavior this morning was very unlike her. However——.”

Yoshitsune Kuruno 7-*dan*, someone who's seen many Women's League and Sub League hopefuls bow out, strongly declares the last thing I expected.

“She's not that weak. I guarantee it.”

“Huh?”

“I've built her up in the Practice League myself.”

He grins at me and continues.

“Now, get in there and watch where everyone can see you.”

“..... Alright. I’ll go in ...”

Following behind him, I step lightly.

Luckily (?), all the pieces were lined up and ready to go at the start of the matches, so no one notices me when I come in.

Making sure that neither Keika nor Ai Yashajin know I’m here, I move to a place where I can see their board.

Ai had the first move. Keika is on defense.

Both open their Bishop’s Path and then Ai uses her third turn to advance the Pawn in front of her Rook. As orthodox as orthodox gets.

Then, the fourth move.

Now her turn, Keika starts talking before making her move.

“..... I’m glad I’m playing you first.”

“Ohh? So, you’d like to get the most painful match over with?”

Keika laughs through her nose at Ai’s attempt to provoke her while making a motherly, almost saintly smile. Then, she says something that borders on demonic.

“I wanted a good warm-up before facing Ai.”

“.....!!”

Rage ignites, or close enough to it.

Ai’s hair flares up in anger in the blink of an eye, glaring at Keika. Her long, black locks puff out like wings.

Keika’s provocation worked, hook, line and sinker.

Ai may be a Shogi prodigy and she may act older and more mature than most girls her age, but she’s still in elementary school. A heavily sheltered, upper-

class lady too.

If Keika, who's rolled with all the punches life can give, ever got serious about exploiting those openings, she has many to choose from.

She's never really used any off-the-board tactics or ploys.

Part of that is because she's a kind person Looking at it in a harsher way, she didn't use a weapon in her arsenal. The other part is that her pride stopped her, she wanted to win on skill alone.

But right now ...

Those naïve thoughts are gone.

There are good and bad things about that mindset.

But in her position, the only way she can prove that she's turned over a new leaf ... is to fight and win: that's it.

"..... Fine by me. I'll end you, quickly. Now make your move."

"Sure."

With that, Keika reaches for Ai's Bishop.

"Bishop Exchange?!"

I couldn't stop myself from blurting out.

Taking an opponent's Bishop while on defense, that means that Keika has chosen——.

"Move Loss Bishop Exchange ... Seriously?!"

Ai's face twitches yet again.

That strategy is Ai's forte. It's also the strategy she used to leave my first apprentice in the dust during her entrance test.

Keika using it against her sends a clear message——*I'm stronger than you and Ai Hinatsuru both.*

That's the only thing it could mean.

That taunt hit home. Ai is furious.

..... You toil in the Practice League, a bottom feeder for more than seven years and try this on me!!?

Such a scary face.

Ai is so pissed, I'm surprised there isn't fire coming out of her mouth.

Meanwhile, Keika moves both of her Golds and both of her Silvers around her King to protect it like a fortress. It's a modern style, one that Big Sis likes to use.

Ai snorts.

"Can you afford to protect your King to that degree? Move Loss may be a defensive strategy, but it won't work if you don't have any pieces to move."

Keika ignored Ai's taunt, barely even registering it with a glance.

"..... Tsk!"

On the other hand, Ai's clenched fist is hovering over the board as she forces a battle with fire in her veins.

I doubt she realizes it herself, and she'd deny it if someone pointed it out, but it's obvious at first glance, from where I'm standing, that Ai has lost her cool.

And it shows in her Shogi.

Rather than use her cunning wit like usual, her offense is relying on pure power.

Since that kind of attack is easy to read, it's not breaking through. She had to waste a lot of moves to set everything up and isn't getting anything out of it.

While Ai was busy with that, Keika started building her defensive formation, an *anaguma*.

"Tsk!" Ai snaps her tongue.

She's getting pencil whipped. Keika's Move Loss Bishop Exchange strategy baited her into attacking, but she couldn't do enough damage to prevent a solid wall from going up around her King.

Ai changes her strategy, moving in to destroy the *anaguma* before it's finished.

However, Keika wasn't fazed and completed it without breaking a sweat.

Now Keika's King is in *zetto*. One move could never put her in check—sort of like having the star power up in a videogame.

That way, she doesn't have to read defensively and can focus all her energy on offense.

"Hm! She's quite calm, Keika," says Kuruno-sensei.

"Despite not having the same amount of reading skill and with that much defense in place, it's only necessary to read the other side of the board. Only someone who understands their own strengths and weaknesses can fight like that."

In a Bishop Exchange match where both players have to make sure they don't leave openings for the Bishop to deploy, that's a huge advantage.

"Okay then ... How about—this!!"

There's no point in hanging onto the Bishop anymore.

Ai tries to shake up the board by deploying her Bishop for an *ace in the hole* right in the middle of the action.

A move that works both offensively and defensively, but—.

"Here I come," says Keika under her breath as she advances the Pawn in front of her Rook, pressing her attack down the eighth column.

The counter has begun.

"?! Tsssk!"

Not shy at all about making loud, frustrated noises, Ai moves her central Bishop to help with defense and deploys a Pawn to keep the attack at bay.

However ...

“Hah. Such a child,” Keika laughs, not the least bit intimidated and slides her Rook from the eighth column to the sixth.

“..... Ah?!!”

Ai presses down on her eye with one hand reflexively, digging her fingers deep enough into her skin to make it turn red.

The eighth column attack was a feint.

Her true target was the sixth: to divide Ai’s forces in half right down the middle!

“Hm. Keika will be satisfied with this record,” Kuruno-*sensei* says with a strong nod.

He’s right. Keika all but ended this match before it could advance into a late game.

From start to finish, Keika was in complete control and overpowered Ai. From what I could tell, she didn’t waste a single move the whole match, and I’m a Move Loss Bishop Exchange specialist.

A perfect record.

“I never thought ... Keika could play like this ...”

“She’s very studious and certainly has enough potential. Enough to join the Women’s League, for sure.”

Effort alone may not be enough to overcome talent.

However, talent can be manipulated, sealed away.

This match proves it.

As she normally is, Ai would've figured out what Keika was trying to do early on, but she was too hotheaded to see it this time.

If there was one word to describe the reason she lost, that would be ... "Arrogance," Kuruno-*sensei* and I say at the same time.

She let her perfect Practice League record go to her head. She didn't even try to hide it. Ai looked down on the other Practice League members who showed up late to lectures without a second thought. She told everyone flat out: *I'll overpower anyone anytime*. But strength without caution leaves a lot of openings.

And Keika took full advantage of them.

She studied *her opponent*, not just her opponent's playing style, and eliminated her best points before the match even began. She's good!

“Kgh!”

Ai is hurting so much I can practically hear her teeth clench together, but she doesn't have any moves left.

Trying to hold out now will just prolong the humiliation.

Her eyes turn bright red as she puts her hand down on her piece stand to show she's giving up and starts to stand to get away from the board because the pain is too much.

But Keika didn't let her. Her voice snaps like a whip, “Manners!!”

“.....!”

Ai flinches, shaken to the core by Keika's overwhelming aura.

Keika repeats herself, softer. “Where are your manners?”

Ai sits back down on her ankles, grinding her teeth together and endures the humiliation just long enough to squeeze out the words, “..... I, I I lost ...”

“Thank you for the match.”

Doing a total 180, Keika calmly bows her head like a higher-ranking player should.

Ai probably won't be able to beat Keika for a while after this ... It was that crushing of a defeat.



“Keika took down Yashajin?!”

“Ai’s winning streak is over?!”

“And with Move Loss, too!”

“Keika is a beast!”

Practice League members can’t stop talking about her epic victory.

On the other hand, Keika’s face is blank. Rather than celebrating, she’s resetting the board. Her mind has already moved on to the next match.

Moved on to who she’s fighting next.

That—mind-blowing talent.



THE TINY SORCERESS

The second match started right away.

The piece flip put Ai Hinatsuru on defense.

“..... When you’re ready!”

“Ready when you are.”

They exchange bows and Ai turns on the chess clock.

It starts chipping away at the time for their battle.

“.....”

Keika uses some of it before her first move to clear her head.

Using time here might seem like a waste, but the first move determines the pace of the entire match, its rhythm. This isn’t a bad choice.

Unfazed by Ai’s quick-glance, move-fast style, Keika is forcing her to match her own pace.

“..... Humph. She should make her move already.”

My second apprentice didn’t have an opponent this round because of numbers. She comes over next to me and says flat out, “A little bratty, a little proud,” and her eyes are still a bit red.

The pain must’ve made her cry ... Kids that cry get stronger.

I put my hand on her head and tell her, “Watch until the end, okay?”

The little lady snaps back, “Don’t touch me!”

Cute.

It probably didn’t have anything to do with what Ai said but ...

“.....!”

Keika pulls her lip back and makes her first move with a sharp breath.

—7 Six Pawn.

She uses her first turn to open the Bishop's Path.

"....."

Then Ai cautiously opens her own Bishop's Path. It's almost like she's trying to feel out what's in Keika's heart.

My apprentice hasn't revealed whether she's playing Static or Ranging Rook just yet.

It's better not to show that as long as you can. An obvious strategy for the defending player ... But, watching her play as much as I have, I can tell that her spirit still has the brakes on.

"... Is all that ... still bothering you ...?" I whisper under my breath with my eyes on my first apprentice.

Her heart is still hurting after the match with Mio, then there was the loss against Asuka and then, even more importantly, came Keika's off-the-board tactics earlier this morning All them are hitting Ai's weak spot Mental toughness.

But that wasn't the only plan Keika had up her sleeve. Everything up until now was just off-the-board appetizers.

Third move—.

"....."

Keika's fingers clamp down on a piece, pick it up and snap it down with a high-pitched *crack!* She's shown her hand.

"Huh!?"

Ai jumps in surprise once she saw what it was.

—7 Five Pawn.

Keika advanced her first Pawn another space forward! This is——.

My second apprentice and I stifle our surprise at the same time, “Third File Rook?!” Keika plays Static Rook, but she’s using Ranging?

Has she been practicing Ranging Rook strategies too?!

“.....?!”

Ai looks shocked, and I don’t blame her.

Ranging Rook was supposed to be the ace up her sleeve, but I bet having the same strategy used before she had a chance to play it killed her enthusiasm.

But she can’t stay shaken forever.

“..... Okay!”

Ai nods like she’s giving herself a good talking to, flexes her fingertips and pushes her middle Pawn forward.

Keika immediately closes the Bishop Path. Maybe she wanted to avoid the chaos that follows a Bishop Exchange so she could build up her formation?

Ai reveals her plan right after that.

Just as Ai Yashajin said, “Central Rook?!” Ai Hinatsuru slid her Rook into the center of the board. She’s going to use Gokigen Central Rook.

That being said——.

“..... Never thought I’d see the day these two would play Ranging Rook against each other.”

I let out a long sigh. Sparks are already flying across their board.

Just like in Ai’s match against Asuka, there are no standards to follow when both players play Ranging Rook, so the match can become a free-for-all at the drop of a hat.

And Ai is extremely good in a free-for-all.

Everyone in this room should know about her borderline brutal reading skills and her tendency to slice through formations, complete or not, with sheer force at any moment.

Asuka won because of her experience, but Keika plays Static Rook just like she does. Against her, Ai has the advantage.

Did Keika know this was coming?

I sneak a peek at her face—now I'm certain.

“..... Research, for sure.”

My second apprentice looks up at me, confused, “What?”

It looks like a free-for-all at first glance ... But there's a trap hidden in there somewhere.

I'd be willing to bet that Big Sis told Keika that the two of us were practicing with Mr. Oishi.

Also, if Ai saw my match against Mr. Natagiri, she would decide to play Gokigen Central Rook on defense too ... She could predict it.

Then use that prediction to set up a trap.

And the formation Keika chose is——.

“Third File Rook Ishida-style is it?”

In general, Ranging Rook strategies are designed to take a punch and hit back harder with a counterattack. But this one, it's a haymaker that hits hard and fast if used on offense, an extremely aggressive strategy.

As for Ai's formation—even I, her Master, didn't see it coming.

“?!Ai is making an *anaguma*?!”

“Stupid girl! It's too early to get intimidated!” Ai Yashajin quips in frustration.

But Ai Hinatsuru's decision isn't a mistake.

It's not wrong, but——.

“Is that it?”

I smell a trap in the works.

Keika chose to make an *anaguma* in her first match, but now she's forcing her second opponent to do it, an opponent much better in the late game than Ai Yashajin, no less ...

“Using Central Rook Left *anaguma* is the latest strategy to combat first turn Ishida-style But completing that formation takes far too many turns and so many pieces get committed to defense that there are hardly any pieces left for an attack.”

“So, what you're saying is that when someone without experience tries to play it, they end up not being able to do much of anything ... Yes?”

I nod to Ai Yashajin in response.

“It's because Ai wants to attack. It's in her nature. She doesn't have much experience with Ranging Rook to begin with, so choosing a strategy that goes against your instincts seems a bit”

Risky, I have to say.

In other words——.

“..... Keika made her choose an *anaguma* on purpose ...?”

“That's believable. That hag is mean enough to do it.”

Ai grits her teeth, remembering the sting that came with her last loss.

Sure enough, Keika finishes a *mino gakoi*, a castle-like defensive formation, before Ai completes her own defenses and stages her attack on the side of the board. What perfect timing!

“..... She's good!!”

Although my voice overlapped with my second apprentice's, I was praising her while Ai sounded more like she was making a painful admission.

"Kgh ...?!"

This is a tense moment. My first apprentice is biting her lip, trying to endure after Keika set up this defensive formation, and she slides her Rook to the side to cover. Unfortunately, neither her offense nor her defense are set in place while an all-out assault is bearing down on her.

Shogi logic says that allowing your opponent to make an *anaguma* puts you at a disadvantage.

However, that's not always the case during a match.

Keika's battle cunning deserves praise.

"There ... Yes. Yes."

Keika nods to herself as if mulling over her options, thinking through each move and methodically working through her waiting time.

She had to have done a lot of preparation.

But rather than plow ahead with what her research told her, she's being careful to make sure her results are holding up before making each move. She hasn't been this cautious in quite a while. Keika is so calm, it's almost like Big Sis is playing

She's not going to break easily today. I can feel it.

That cool-headed Keika makes her move.

Just as my second apprentice said, "She moved the Bishop to the edge?!" Keika slid her Bishop to the edge of the board and Ai chased after it with her Rook. Ai then moved her own Bishop into the space vacated by Keika's, promoting it.

"She made a Promoted Bishop. Would it be fair to say they're even so

far?”

“No ... Don’t you think she got baited into it?”

The match looks even at first glance. But——.

“Sure, Ai promoted the Bishop, but that location couldn’t be worse. Her Rook is also pinned down

On her next turn, Keika pulls her edge-side Bishop back into her ranks right away.

Now that the Rook is free to move, Ai slides it to the eighth column to align with her Promoted Bishop and uses the two of them together for a counterattack.

“.....? Why did she move the Bishop back?”

Ai Yashajin tilts her head, confused.

Right now, Keika’s decision to retreat looks like nothing more than a wasted move.

Then, the moment that Ai Hinatsuru went on the attack, I saw it.

Almost as if Keika were waiting for Ai to move that Rook, she sets up a counterattack aiming right for it!

“?! Now I get it! That’s what she was after!”

That Rook is what makes Ai’s offense go.

Getting her strongest piece off the board was Keika’s *trap* all along!

“Yes!”

“.....!”

Keika gives a slight nod to herself. Meanwhile Ai’s face is twisting like a jolt of pain just shot through her. Then she looks down at the floor.

Ai’s Rook has nowhere to run. It’s as good as dead.

—Is the fat lady about to sing ...?

Just when that thought crossed my mind, “..... Ugh Uhhh! Uwh,” I heard her whine.

Drip, drip. Tears fall into Ai’s lap as she stares at the floor—she’s crying.

“.....!”

Keika hadn’t shown any emotion up until now, but she’s wavering. There’s no happiness in her eyes. It’s more like she’s trying to make the pain go away with sheer willpower.

She’s probably thinking Ai is going to throw in the towel. I bet she thought Ai’s spirit had snapped in the face of a much stronger formation.

But, that wasn’t the case.

It wasn’t that Ai’s spirit was broken—.

“..... I’m sorry Keika”

Eyes still glued to the floor, Ai tries as hard as she can to get the words out.

“I, I didn’t know, what to do ... My Shogi was all messed up, just like the feelings in my heart I, I love you Keika ... All you’ve, done for me And now, playing against you, remembering everything I, I just Right here Right in this room——.”

Ai looks up, her face wet with tears, and says, “I, I don’t want to lose anymore!!”

“.....!!”

Far from being broken, Ai’s spirit charges forward in a sparkling blaze that sends a chill down Keika’s spine.

My apprentice made a vow back when she lost to Big Sis and Ai Yashajin in this room.

She swore to get strong. She swore that she wouldn’t lose to anyone again.

With another loss staring down at her, her desire to win overpowered all the other emotions. I can see it in her face.

Her instincts as a Shogi player are shining through.

Just like I did against Mr. Natagiri, Ai is—facing the impossible!

“..... Okay!!”

Ai wipes away her tears with renewed spirit and makes a move that I never expected.

I don’t believe my eyes.

“She sacrificed the Promoted Bishop?!”

“She’s willing to give it up just to save her Rook? But being so protective of the Rook will ...”

It happened before Ai Yashajin could finish that sentence.

My first apprentice, who’d been advancing at a brisk pace, did something even more shocking.

“The Rook too?!”

Just when she’d opened an escape route for it, Ai sent that Rook straight into Keika’s defensive formation without a second thought and claimed her Bishop.

“Why? Why would she do that?! That Bishop was just twiddling its thumbs in the back! There’s no way taking it was worth having her Rook on the front line ... Has she lost her mind?!”

Exchanging big pieces is an even trade from an offensive capability standpoint. But it’s the piece’s *movement* that’s important.

Keika’s Bishop was blocked by her own pieces and was no threat whatsoever.

But once Ai’s Rook is on her piece stand, Keika can deploy it where she wishes on the board.

Ai was being *worldly*.

That's why it looks like what Ai did actually *helped* Keika.

What's more, Ai already sacrificed her own Bishop to break that Rook free.

So, throwing it away just to get the Bishop in return That whole sequence was a waste!

".....?"

Keika is being cautious but goes ahead and takes Ai's Rook. While she can't tell what Ai is thinking, this is theoretically the right move ... I could see her train of thought in the way she took the piece off the board.

Ai deploys her captured Bishop immediately after that.

".....?!"

Everyone watching the match gasped as if lightning struck them all at once.

All the surprises up to this point were nothing compared to that last move.

Because—she put it down in a place where *it'll get taken in any direction wherever it moves*.

"For free?!!" Mio and Ayano, watching boardside now that their own matches were over, blurted out, "Doing this is like giving the Bishop away!"

".....?!!!"

Keika is stunned but makes the sure move and takes the Bishop.

She can see that, as long as she keeps defending, Ai's offensive will run out of gas soon enough.

But Ai keeps going, her hands constantly on the move.

Attack. Just attacking again and again.

The board transforms right before our eyes. Pieces are exchanged every time

Ai slams into Keika's defenses and are deployed by their new Master in a completely different spot, warping around the board.

It's Shogi from a different dimension.

Like we're caught somewhere between different realities and the board can't balance between the two. As a Static Rook party member, this is terrifying. I'm sure Keika feels the same way.

She may be playing Ranging Rook, but Keika is a core member of the Static Rook party.

Once you're used to a specific feel, it doesn't go away overnight. That's normal ... if this were *normal*.

But right now, the girl sitting across the board from Keika is——.

“Take ... Put ... Take ... Put ... Put, put, take——.”

Her body is violently rocking back and forth, and Ai transcends the Shogi board.

And then *transcends this dimension*.

“Take, put, take, put, take, take, put, take,
puttakeputtakeherehereherehereherehere—.”

Her hands on the *tatami* mats, Ai looks up from the board with a start.

Her line of sight somewhere around the ceiling, she keeps muttering under her breath,

"Hereherehereherehereherehereherehereherehereherehereherehereherehere

It's like she's communicating with some Shogi satellite out in space, staring up into the air like that.

The physical board is only getting in her way.

All eleven boards she has in her head must be working in overdrive, reading ahead at an unparalleled speed at this very moment, showing her infinite

futures of a reality that may or may not be.

Ai reaches out toward that future.

“——Here!”

She sends another piece into Keika’s defenses.

“.....?!”

Keika blocks it. She didn’t have a choice. It’s obvious that Ai is forcing this attack, so the board will naturally go back in her favor, as long as she keeps her guard up.

It should.

“She moved the defensive Gold by deploying her captured Bishop ... Was it to make an opening to attack? But that was her only big piece, and now that it’s gone,”Ai Yashajin says with one hand clamped down over her eye, desperately trying to read the board in her signature pose.

But the whole thing must look cloudy to her because she and Ai Hinatsuru are reading it in completely different ways. It’s like she’s struggling to keep up.

Ai’s King is protected by an *anaguma*.

That alone means that she doesn’t have many offensive pieces, but now she’s without any Rooks or Bishops. How is she going to attack?

Chances are that Keika, the other Practice League members, the Sub League members here to instruct them or even the pros for that matter No one knew what move to do next.

There was only one exception——Ai Hinatsuru.

“Here!”

By attacking, replenishing pieces on her piece stand, and attacking again over and over, Ai starts dismantling Keika’s defenses space by space.

“Here!!”

With each move, a whole new *space* came into existence right in the middle of the *space* called a Shogi board.

Her eyes fixed on the new reality, Ayano muffles her own stunned scream.

“W-When did ...? Keika’s formation is in tatters?!”

It sure is.

In only twenty moves, Ai turned an almost certain loss into a guaranteed victory with what everyone thought was a forced, reckless attack.

Mio and Ai Yashajin mumble in disbelief.

“The *Mino gakoi* is breaking apart”

“An unorganized, bumbling attack like that got through It’s This is, like——.”

Like watching her cast magic.

Ai’s piece stand is empty.

Keika has a Rook, a Bishop and a Gold. Not to mention five Pawns too. Considering she took those big pieces with a Gold and a Lance, Ai took heavy losses.

But even so, Ai has an overwhelming lead on the board.

I know what this magic is called.

WORLDLY



“D-Did Ai make an *anaguma* Because she was setting this up?”

“Of course not?! That would mean she left herself wide open to attack from the start?! No one would do that!!”

My second apprentice rejects Mio’s theory the moment she said it.

However, the tiniest traces of fear were starting to show up on her face.

“That’s too stupid, that wouldn’t But”

The two of them are Static Rook at heart, so the sense required to do a *worldly* attack is beyond what they can understand.

Trying to think it through logically will just make everything from the first move look random and the formations confusing, like this. The very foundation of your understanding of Shogi gets destroyed.

Destroying the senses—that’s magic.

That’s how good she’s playing, too good.

Seeing that kind of limitless power during a match makes room for fear and doubt, outside emotions that take reading speed down a notch.

That’s where many players crumble, losing their way like a ship without a compass.

“..... She’s horrifyingly talented ...”

Ai has acquired a worldly sense in such a short amount of time that even I, her master, can’t comprehend.

She’s not sending her Rook into battle armed with a sharpened stick. I’m witnessing my apprentice’s first steps to becoming a true All-Rounder, her seemingly limitless talent. My body temperature is climbing. I can feel it.

That heat builds up into a word that escapes my mouth, “Intense.”

As her Master, I’m happy to see my apprentice improve. But before that.

As a competitor, my blood is boiling!

TO TEN-YEAR-OLD ME

“..... She’s good,” I groan to myself as the gateway to a different world of Shogi opens right before my eyes.

My early game was perfect.

..... At least, I thought it was.

But the gears started jamming mid-game when Ai sacrificed her Promoted Bishop ... Even after that, I thought I played the best possible move turn after turn ...

“..... Very good,”

I glance up at the little girl seated on the other side of the board once again.

That girl is concentrating on the board so hard that she’s holding her breath, cheeks puffed out as she analyzes every single detail.

Almost the way an athlete who is running a 100-meter sprint at full speed finds that extra burst to go even faster ... And she’s about to overtake me.

“..... I’ve been running a marathon, I’ll have you know ...”

I doubt she heard my gripe either. Of course she didn’t.

Sacrificing a Rook to take a Bishop.

Then deploying that Bishop in a spot that was as good as throwing it away.

That magical, almost universal sense dismantled my defenses in no time flat. The fact that I was leagues ahead until the mid-game made no difference.

“..... But where ...?”

—Where did I go wrong?

—Where did things turn against me?

Knowing that I'm about to lose breaks my concentration, and I reflect on what just happened.

Then, long before that back to when I first joined the Practice League.

A seven-year quest to become a Women's League player.

Back then, I thought I was starting on the journey a little bit later than everyone else. That's all.

I thought that I was talented just because Dad was a professional player. It was so easy to think so in those days.

I was certain that if I took it seriously, I'd be in the Women's League by the time I turned twenty. All of us in the Practice League at that time talked about how great the future was going to be, laughing and enjoying every day.

But I'm the only one still here.

Everyone else either joined the Women's League or went to college, found a job or got married after they quit.

Happy birthday.

I'm not sure when it started, but now those words sound like a curse.

My window of opportunity feels like it's closing a little more with each year that goes by.

Even though I had to keep studying, I had to research Shogi as much as I could, I started to hate the sight of a Shogi board.

Even though I was doing what I love, pursuing my dream, in reality that very dream was starting to crush me.

It's gotten to the point where just coming to the association is embarrassing.

I don't want to see Ginko. I don't want to see either of the Ai's. I don't want to see any of their names written in magazines or newspapers.

Because I'm envious.

Because I'm jealous.

Those girls are living my dream. They've become what I wanted to be, possess what I wanted to have. That's why I feel so worthless whenever I see them. Playing Shogi starts to feel pointless and I start to question why I'm even alive.

—You're not needed.

—You have no talent.

It's like every time I see a black circle on my match card, that's what it's saying to me. My spirit starts to crack with each one.

Every time I see a white circle on Ai's Match Card, it's saying the same thing and my spirit cracks even more.

She's done nothing wrong, and yet there's a part of me that hates this girl more and more. That's why I don't want to see her, don't want to talk to her.

But worst of all I hate that part of myself.

I hate the weak me!

"Whew"

I take a deep breath and look toward the ceiling to settle down.

This is about as good as trying to fix my breaking spirit with scotch tape. It's a total mess, but somehow somehow it's still holding up.

The chess clock ticks away the seconds.

I hear heavy breaths from my friends and fellow Practice League members; all of them desperately trying to read the board.

And the sound of Shogi pieces snapping like chopped wood adds fuel to my spiritual fire.

I've heard these sounds since before I was born.

I learned the rules from my parents when I was six and hated it with a passion

when I was eleven.

Then I seriously *faced* Shogi for the first time when I was eighteen.

It's been seven years since then.

I've lived in this world, trying to become a Women's League player for longer than this little girl sitting in front of me can remember her own life. I've been fighting to make Shogi, something I once hated with every fiber of my being, into a lifelong career. Being cut deeper, more painfully than spilling blood ever could be the entire time.

Do I want to run away from it? Escape from this dream?

"..... You know you don't."

Because seriously, I don't know when to give up, even in a hopeless situation like this.

That's right.

I don't give up.

Not to brag, but—I'm confident in saying that there's no worse loser out there than me.

"Not yet!!"

SLAP!

I smack both cheeks and slam a piece down into my formation with a louder *SNAP!* And then hit the chess clock with an even louder *WHACK!*

"Come and get me!!" I howl at a grade school girl to come back from so far behind, to get all this built-up poison out of my heart. Appearances don't mean a thing.

"K Keika's broken ..."

Yaichi sounds scared. Has he been seeing things? This is the real me.

“Go get her, Keika!”

“You’re doing great, Ai!”

More and more Practice League members gather around and start cheering for us now that their own matches have ended.

Our lead instructor is silent, but I can feel his kind, supportive gaze.

I can tell that Sub League members, people who have done practice sessions with me, who used to be in the Practice League with me, are silently offering their support while busy with their own matches.

That wasn’t all.

The friendly lady who always says hello from her post at the gift shop downstairs has her hands together in front of her chest, praying for me. The security guard, who’s always offered a kind word ever since I was a kid whenever I would come to the association, is watching this match from the shade of a support column in a corner of the arena. They both think they’re well hidden, but they’re not hidden at all. They’re on the clock, so the two of them are neglecting their duties right now.

“.....!”

A spot deep in my nose twitches, my eyes tear up and make the characters on the pieces look blotchy.

So many people are here supporting me.

So many people are holding out hope that someone as weak and pitiful as I am can win.

My brittle, nearly snapped spirit is now——.

“..... Burning!!”

Now able to focus, I turn my attention back to the fight.

I’m at a disadvantage.

But I still have an option left.

Calling upon all the skills and techniques I've built up during my journey——.

"I will take you down!!"

I take hold of my own King and put it back down with force.

King—quick escape!

"Followed by!!"

A mad dash to the opposite side of the board: *nyugyoku*!

An approaching King always makes an opponent slow down and think twice, which will apply pressure to the opposing King as mine comes barreling down on it!

The key to any comeback is to keep pressure on the opposing King.

You have to make your opponent continuously think about offense and defense. That way, they have to work twice as hard under pressure and are more likely to make a mistake.

I up the ante by slapping my pieces down as quickly as possible with each move to interrupt Ai's thinking rhythm, a little technique that I've picked up. All the experience I've cultivated in the Practice League ... Everything I've learned since I was in training before then ... I call on it all, bring every single tidbit to bear in this match!!

Even Ai Hinatsuru shouldn't be able to handle all of this at once ...!

"..... Here, here, hereherehereherehereherehere——."

She's not backing down.

"Hereherehereherehereherehereherehereherehereherehereherehereher

Not only is Ai unaware of the people around us or my tactics, I'm pretty sure she's forgotten that I'm even here. She's completely absorbed in the board, looking at Shogi and nothing else.

Seeing her like that, I think to myself, *Have I ever faced Shogi with that much intensity before?*

I want to be a Women's League player.

That dream of mine, it was because if I joined the Women's League, people would call me *Sensei*. People would respect me. I chose to follow that dream for the simple reason that my childhood home is also a Shogi classroom, and it looked like more fun than getting a *job* job. There was nothing else to it. *If Ginko can do it, then so can I.* That's it, cut and dried.

My drive to become a Women's League player didn't come from a love of Shogi.

That may be true for the person I was at ten years old, when I wrote that letter but I'd forgotten what it felt like by the time I joined the Practice League. That was the most important thing.

I was always concerned with what others were thinking while I was playing Shogi. I was so concerned with what they thought of me that I never concentrated entirely on my matches. I always had the future, money, status and fame in the back of my mind when I was playing.

But, Ai is different.

Ai wants to join the Women's League because she really loves Shogi.

Then again, she probably has no interest in the qualifications at all. Ai had no idea that *Women's League players* existed until recently.

It was her admiration for Yaichi and Shogi's charms that drove her to dive headfirst into this world without thinking about the implications. She's not in it for herself.

Unbelievable, yes? This nine-year-old girl loved Shogi so much that she left her home behind to become a live-in apprentice all by herself. It's incredible.

She left the only home she knew to jump into the arms of her favorite Shogi

player.

Just like the undefeated Snow White——just like Ginko.

“..... I can’t compete with that ...”

My King is already trapped. It can’t break free. Even I, weak as I am, can tell.

There’s a chance I’ll never join the Women’s League.

That window became even smaller today.

However, I think I found something even more important.

This girl there’s something that playing against Ai made me realize.

A love for Shogi.

The feeling, a desire to keep playing it.

Ai reminded me what it felt like, the pure love for Shogi I had back when I was ten years old.

She has so much more talent but this girl might be my younger self, reincarnated by the Shogi gods.

If the girl who wrote that letter saw her twenty-year-old self, she’d probably be disappointed.

But not because I didn’t make my dream come true.

Because I’d lost sight of it.

So——.

I straighten my posture, put my hand on my piece stand, lower my head, and say as loud and clearly as I can.

“I lost.”

Words I've said thousands and thousands of times before.

Words I'll probably say hundreds of thousands of times more.

To my ten-year-old self.

Twenty-five-year-old me is still chasing the dream.



START LINE

Ai jumps with a start when Keika admits defeat in a loud and clear voice, not sure what to do before throwing down her head in bow.

“.....”

Her train of thought returned to this world from whatever dimension it had been in, and she must have realized what she'd done. Keeping her pale face down, Ai clenches her fists as hard as she can right above her knees.

With that loss, Keika's chance to remove her B went out the window.

She's not in danger of dropping down a rank yet but that doesn't change the fact that her path to the Women's League just got a lot longer.

No one in the arena says anything for a while, the afterglow of an intense battle washing over them.

The first one to break the silence——was Keika.

“Ai.”

“.....!!”

Flinch!

Keika continues talking to my trembling apprentice, “Thank you for not holding back.”

A refreshed smile appears on Keika's face as she says, “..... I'm really sorry. Putting all that distance between us and acting like I have I, I've been a horrible example as the eldest member of the Practice League. I'm so, so sorry”

“K Keikaaa!”

“But I'm all better now! Let's do a review session, okay?”

Ai is on the verge of tears as Keika talks to her in a bright and cheery voice and starts putting the pieces back in the opening formation.

But before she could finish, one of the Practice League members who watched their match speaks up.

“Uh, um Ai!”

Mio.

Ai jumps again, surprised to hear her name coming from beside her. She looks over to see Mio throw herself to the *tatami* mat, bowing so low that her forehead brushes the surface. Full prostration *dogeza*.

“I’m sorry! Sorry that I cried when I lost last time Please forgive me!!”

“Uwhee?! B, But it was my fault! I wasn’t playing with the right mindset And Master got mad at me for it——.”

“What?! Kujuryu-sensei got mad at you because of me?! Sorry, I’m really really sorry!!”

“No, no! I’m the one who owes you——.”

Ai and Mio face off in double prostrated *aidogeza* and an infinite apology loop with no end in sight. It’s a perpetual motion machine of cuteness ...

Keika watches the two of them with a gentle smile on her face. But, for the first time all day, her expression wavers.

Her line of sight led to——.

“Ginko”

Big Sis was crying.

She came into the arena sometime during the match and watched it from the corner of the room. Her normally pale skin whiter than usual; she’s wasting away.

She’s never let anyone see her like this before, even after a horrible match.

But right now, she'd probably collapse like a sack of potatoes if it weren't for the pillar she's leaning on. She's in rough shape ... But her ash-colored eyes are focused solely on the finalized Shogi board and her younger sister apprentice.

Big Sis opens her mouth to speak. "Keika"

"I lost." Still smiling, Keika cuts her off before she can continue, "I'm sorry, Ginko. You gave me all that precious time and I played a pathetic game of Shogi——."

"That was good Shogi."

"Huh?" Keika asks, confused. Big Sis smiles between her tears and says ...

... "That was no dress-up doll. That was good Shogi, the kind only you can play."

".....!"

Tears build up in Keika's eyes, more and more every second.

She bites her lip to hold them back, but it's no use. Tears keep coming.

"..... I'm so sorry, Ginko ...! Thank you ...!"

Big Sis's words triggered the tears that didn't come out after the loss. Hot streaks roll down her cheeks as she thanks her and apologizes at the same time.

The kind of tears a doll could never shed, tears that can only come from a person who's worked as hard as they could. Hot, hot tears.

After that, Keika split the afternoon matches, 1-1.

She's still in danger of dropping down a rank but—.

I think that she played very well in both of those matches, the kind of Shogi that only she can play.

EPILOGUE

“I’m home.”

“Uh-huh

My father was reading the newspaper in our *tatami* room when I walked in the front door, almost like he was there on purpose.

It’s bizarre enough that he’s reading the morning paper in the evening. It’s the same one he had in his hands when I left earlier today, but it’s even stranger how restless he is.

He must know what happened at the Practice League today.

There was a time when it bothered me if he acted like this.

But today——.

“Father. No Master.”

I sit down on the mat, on my ankles in perfect posture, and address him that way.

The last time I did this was maybe the day I quit back when I was twelve.

I called him *Master* for the first time nineteen years ago.

It was right here in this room and I was sitting exactly the same way.

I look my Master in the eyes and start talking. “I’m sure you already know, but I was unable to erase the B from my record today.”

“Uh-huh

“I remember that I said, *If I can’t erase it, I will quit the Practice League* this morning before I left. I also remember that you objected to me joining the Practice League, but that you gave me the freedom to make my own decisions while silently watching out for me at the same time ...”

Once the first words were out, I felt like the rest wouldn't stop. So, I will myself to pause, collect my thoughts and continue.

"A long time ago you told me to decide if I wanted to continue or quit. That it had to be my decision."

"Uh-huh"

"I, I want to continue playing Shogi."

I came right out and said exactly how I feel.

"There was a letter inside a notebook I wrote when I was ten. It was in the pages."

".....?"

Seeing that he had no idea what I was talking about, I hold out the letter that I kept with me during today's matches.

Dad takes it from me, unfolds it and starts reading it to himself——.

".....!"

His eyes stop moving, fixed on one spot on the page, right on the spot where this was written as clear as day: *Now that I'm studying Shogi, I get to spend more time with Master. That makes me happy. That's why I want to join the Women's League. My dream is to become a Women's League player and work side-by-side with Master.*

"....."

Dad trembles ever so slightly, my letter clutched in his hands.

"I want to continue playing. My chances of becoming a Women's League player are slim Even if I fail, I want a career involving Shogi. Working as a classroom instructor, on staff at the association, becoming a Shogi journalist I'd even be happy working at the association's gift shop part time. I want to

keep playing to make my dream come true.”

“.....”

“This time this time I’m completely committed. I know that I’m a talentless, spineless excuse for an apprentice but”

I might not be able to fulfill an apprentice’s role as well as Yaichi or Ginko.

But, I’m certain the day will come when I can express my gratitude by making my dream come true ... express my gratitude to the man who always supported me ... to the man who introduced me to Shogi, the game I love.

So——.

“Should I be unable to join the Women’s League may I have your permission to always call you *Master*?”

“Of”

Dad looks right back at me, his face all scrunched up.

“Of course, ya can!” Master was nice enough to say, while shedding a stream of tears for his useless apprentice.

I couldn’t help but cry right along with him. I’m almost 26, but I bawled like a ten year old, wailing at the top of my lungs.

I’ll never forget ... forget this day, the day I got one step closer to my dream.

A week has passed since those Practice League matches.

“W- Wel ... come!”

Asuka greets a string of customers along with me as they file into the bathhouse one after another.

Master Kiyotaki, Big Sis and Keika are already upstairs getting the Shogi

boards ready while Ai Hinatsuru and Mr. Oishi have been prepping the boilers since this morning for battle on the first floor.

For today, at the Gokigen Bathhouse in Kyoubashi, the Kiyotaki Shogi family rented out the whole place to host a Shogi competition.

It's Ai Yashajin's Induction Ceremony and Celebratory Tournament.

Ai's grandfather was so happy that we asked him to help, he provided all sorts of prizes for us.

"Oh, wow! I want that PS4!"

"I would like to win that hot spring tour package for my parents!"

"And Cha. Cha wants to bwatthe with Masta!"

"C-Charlette! That's a no-no?!"

The Grade Schooler Practice Group members are all back to their usual selves Nah, after getting through all that had happened, they're closer than ever.

Everyone couldn't join in since it was such short notice, but lots of Kansai Shogi pros and Women's League members showed up to participate.

Chairman Tsukimitsu dropped in to say hello with his secretary Sasari Oga guiding him by the hand. He also lectured Mr. Oishi about "acting like an association director for once and helping out."

The Maestro shot me an angry glare and ignored him.

"Just what is all this noise?!"

Someone tugs at my shirt from behind, the star of today's event.

"Oh. What you think, Ai? Can you feel our Shogi family's love?"

"Huuuh? Would you not use the word *love* please? It's making me uncomfortable. I could have you sued for sexual harassment."

"All these people came here for you, so at least act like you're happy."

“Humph! This whole thing is just a pain ...”

Ai voices her discontent, flicking her hair backwards and acting annoyed.

“Wasn’t this just supposed to be *our Shogi family*? What’s with all these people? I feel like I’m on display. It’s obnoxious!”

“Didn’t I tell you? Everyone gets together when there’s a Shogi event in Kansai

“You look exhausted, organizing the silly thing

Despite all of her complaints, Ai is worried about me. Such a nice girl.

But, she too got drawn into the Shogi tournament by the other grade schoolers. Since her faithful bodyguard Akira wants to play in it as well, no one does anything to help her. Of course, I’m not helping her either.

I was worried the tournament wouldn’t go all that well because it was thrown together at the last minute, but everyone seems to be having a good time.

“Well done, Yaichi.”

“Keika

Keika, who helped Big Sis sort out the details looks like a lot of weight has been taken off her shoulders.

Standing next to me, the two of us look out over the tournament in full swing. Then Keika says, “Can I tell you something? I was going to quit the Practice League.”

“.....!”

“But I decided not to.”

“D- Don’t scare me like that ...”

“I’ll be sticking around for a while, big brother,” she jokingly adds with a short bow. “It’ll be a lot more difficult for me to be promoted to C-1 in the Practice League now but I’ve still got a chance or two to become a Women’s League

player. I don't care if it isn't pretty, but I'll stand my ground to the very end. Stubborn and muddy if I have to, yes?"

"I may not have the right to say this because I'm training your rivals but——," I say as strongly as I can, "you'll make it, for sure. I know you can, Keika. I the Ryuo guarantees it."

"..... Really?"

"Really. Of course."

"So, you'll take responsibility if I don't get in?"

"Responsibility? Sure ... If that's something I can do."

"In that case, if I don't become a Women's League member, I think I'll take the Ryuo as my husband."

Say what? Holy!

"O-Of course!! I'll take full responsibility!! I'd be glad to!!"

My player instincts are sending up fireworks.

Now's the time!

Make the move!

Going red in the face, I pour my heart and soul into a full-on confession of love.

"I I love how you always try your best, Keika!"

"..... I can't say this in front of Ginko, but——," she lowers her voice and leans in close to whisper in my ear, hot breath and all, "I love you too, Yaichi"

"PWFF?!"

For real?! So, this is true love?!

Everyone we know is already here, it would be so easy to announce our engagement right now ... My train of thought is already that far ahead but her

next words blew it right off the tracks.

“But I’m sorry, Yaichi. You’re in second place.”

“Come again?! W-Well ... then who’s in first?!”

“Number one is my first love.”

“F- First love?!”

I’ve never heard anything about this! Talk about a shock to the system!

“Yes. We’ve been together since we were little, always loved one another. There was a time when we couldn’t stand each other and separated for a while but it turns out we were meant to be together.”

“.....!!”

Red flames of jealousy are burning full blast.

I never knew Keika felt this way about anyone ... Where is he?! Lemme at him!! I’ll destroy him in front of the entire Kansai Shogi world!!

I was dead set on it but ...

“It’s not just mine, but Ginko’s and both of the Ai’s as well And I think your number one too, Yaichi? The same first love for everyone in this room, and no matter how much we think we hate it, we always end up together. Something special.”

“What ...?”

“You see, it’s——.”

Keika smiles like an innocent child.

While I’m getting totally caught up in it, she looks at me and says what that *something special* is.

“It’s Shogi!”



FOR THE AFTERWORD: “WAVERING BOARD”

“The Shogi board, it wavers before matches.”

That was professional Shogi player Hirotaka Nozuki 7-*dan*’s answer when I asked him, “What’s it like playing in the Sub League’s 3-*dan* division?”

“The whole board sways back and forth, to the point you start to wonder if you’re sitting up straight or not ... That’s why we put our hands down on the *tatami* mat to steady ourselves, but that board keeps wavering. That’s never happened to me in the professional ranks, not once.”

I sat in stunned silence, but Nozuki-sensei had more to say, “I have a distinct memory of Mr. Kubo leaving the arena and crying in a dark hallway, alone. The one person who everyone knew, without a doubt, would become a titleholder, that seventeen-year-old who everyone knew had an extremely bright future, was crying after not ranking high enough to advance.

Why is he crying? I remember wondering to myself that day. But once I found myself in his shoes I cried just like he did.

The *Worldly Artist* Toshiaki Kubo 9-*dan* went on to claim a title and is currently one of the best active Shogi players.

What drove Shogi players as prestigious as Kubo-sensei and Nozuki-sensei that close to the brink was none other than the Sub League’s age limit.

Nozuki-sensei once described the harsh reality this way: *A match in the Sub League is the equivalent of playing Shogi with a noose around your neck. It’s impossible to play a respectable game.*

The age limit isn’t unique to the Sub League. While the specifics vary, Women’s League hopefuls must contend with it in the Practice League as well.

However, Practice League players have far fewer chances for media exposure

than the Sub League and professional leagues. As someone outside of the Shogi world, I have no way to understand the emotions those women go through when they play.

Though I once happened across an essay while researching.

The article wasn't a piece by a professional writer nor was it in a Shogi magazine, but it was a small, isolated article on the Internet written by a Women's League hopeful.

It was entitled *Age 25*. Reading that short essay I was moved to tears by a Shogi article for the first time.

Once the tears had stopped, a new character had come to life inside my mind.

A character named Keika Kiyotaki.

While it's nothing compared to what professional Shogi players and Women's League players have endured, I've gone through some rough times during my career writing light novels as well.

Getting depressed after a book that I put my heart and soul into, that didn't sell well, I was jealous of authors much younger than myself whose books were flying off the shelves. The nail in the proverbial coffin came when I felt moved and inspired after reading them. *What's the point in writing novels anymore? What have I been doing with my life?* There were days when I wish I hadn't been born in the first place. I don't consider myself anything special, a piece of me feels like I'm the most insignificant person on the planet.

I put all of those emotions into Keika.

My career as a novelist started many years ago, back when I was a second-year student in graduate school. It was just a way for me to make money. I always liked manga and anime, reading books too, but I never thought I would become a novelist when I was growing up. I've been doing this for a living for

many years now. Looking back, it feels like I've been writing *what I think will sell* rather than *what I want to write*.

Now.

I know from the bottom of my heart that I wanted to write this series. Especially for this third installment, it wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that I contemplated my own reasons for living and questioned them from different angles repeatedly during the writing process. Just as Keika found her answer, I found mine. I want to bare my soul to my audience, make their hearts waver with my heart rather than with the tricks of the trade. I plan on keeping my answer in mind as I continue writing further installments in this series.

Also, I would like to write a battle so intense that the board wavers. That is my dream.



**REVIEW
SESSION**

REVIEW SESSION

Sigh

Promising to play a versus match against Big Sis, I made my way into one of the association's third-floor player rooms. Ryou Tsukiyomizaka and Machi Kugui were inside, both bored out of their minds.

"W-What's wrong? Sighs like that don't happen every day ...," I work up the courage to ask.

And Ryou answers with a dejected look in her eyes, "..... Ain't got one."

"Come again? One what?"

"A match," they say in unison, sounding exhausted with their heads down on the desk.

"Don't matter if you're at the top of the Women's League, one loss and it's forever until you play again"

"The losses don't bother me, it's the absence of a match that's unbearable"

"Ahh So that's what's up."

The Women's League has six different title leagues. Since that's only one less than the professionals, it doesn't look all that different.

But, pros have league placement matches. Those alone guarantee around ten matches a year, and there's a decent number of matches that aren't related to titles. You could lose left and right and still have about twenty matches to play each year, so that ends up being one or two a month.

"I agree that Women's League players have it rough. There aren't many matches to begin with, and most tournaments are sudden-death style I mean, heck, I had an eleven-game losing streak and still had matches to play

(haha).”

“Stop laughing. You’re pissing me off.”

“S-Sorry

Yep, Ryou is totally down in the dumps. She is aggressive enough on a good day, but she’s many times worse right now. Practically a wounded wild animal. I wish someone’d put her out of her misery.

Even sprawled out with her face plastered on the desk, Machi looks up at me with jealousy in her eyes.

“..... You seem to be in good form as of late, Ryuo.”

“Got that right. I was watching, you know. That Ken-ou League broadcast. Beating Natagiri-sensei with three *gentei aigoma* in a row, now that’s something else.”

“Nah≡ I *am* the Ryuo, after all♪”

“No beating around the bush now. What’s the key to your good form?”

“The key?” Machi asks.

I tilt my head. “Umm

Sequences happened to go my way, and there are a lot of other reasons but

“I’d say the secret to upping your game would be an *apprentice*, probably —”

“An apprentice?”

“Yeah. I think taking a *live-in apprentice* is what helped me out.”

They both eye me like some shady guy, so I explain a bit more. “The apprentice I live with is a nine-year-old girl, and one thing’s for sure: early to bed, early to rise becomes a lifestyle when you live with an elementary school student. Since I can’t live on takeout every day, there’s no other option but to

eat right as much as possible. I think that's why I have more energy."

"Ohhh?"

The two bored girls suddenly have sparkles in their eyes.

"The best part is that my apprentice is really good around the house, even though she's still in grade school! Her cooking is delicious, no matter what food she makes. She packs lunches for me, and even brews tea from special leaves and has been making desserts for me a lot recently. Since she's so good at managing finances, I only have to worry about upcoming matches. Also——."

"Ryuo, Ryuo?"

"That ain't some apprentice anymore. That's a wife, a young wife."

..... Wife?

"That would be ample explanation. It all makes sense now. Your recent good form is due to having a young wife"

"Ah! It's that *marriage boost* that players sometimes talk about."

"M-Marriage boost? What's that?"

"When a young player who has lived on their own by their own rules settles down to make a family and starts living properly. Their form improves dramatically with a sense of responsibility on their shoulders That is the *marriage boost*! It explains your good form to the letter, Ryuo!!"

"Poke!!" Machi declares, jutting out her finger at me.

Ryou jumps to her feet with a loud *clatter!!*

"Then, if we get hitched?!"

"Indeed!!"

Ah, I don't like where this is going.

Suddenly full of energy, Ryou and Machi descend on me in the blink of an eye,

each taking hold of one of my hands before I can react and yell.

“Marry me!!”

“Marry me!!”

Crap, crap, crap!

“W-Why me of all people?!”

“You were around.”

“You seem simple enough.”

CRAAAAAAAAAAP!

Trembling at one of the strangest marriage proposals ever—.

Both of them suddenly turn pale as a ghost, let go of me and retreat back into the corner of the room.

“W-Well, you are already betrothed, yes Ryuo?”

“G-Got that right! You’ve already got someone that’s a perfect match! We’ll, erm, find someone else!”

“Listen, that’s not the kind of relationship I have with my apprentice. She’s in grade school—.”

“Nope, not her. Ginko.”

“Say whaaat ...?”

Why’d Big Sis’s name come up?

“N-Now that I’ve had time to consider, you only claimed your own title once you started living on your own, Ryuo.”

“And that’s a big room for just living by yourself. Plus, you and Ginko chose that room together. D-Don’t you think that’s a great match?”

“Hang on, hold up, hold up! Are you trying to say that Big Sis and I were living together?! And that’s why I became Ryuo?! You must be joking!!”

I deny it flat out.

“I’ll have you know that Ai is so much better with house stuff than Big Sis ever was! Big Sis burns everything she puts in an oven! It turns out like ash! Oh, and guess what happened the time I asked her to *do laundry every once in a while*?! She started pouring dish soap into the laundry machine with an *I’m useful* look on her face?!”

“B But, come on?! You have to admit Ginko is pretty cute?!”

“That’s right, that’s right! She’s started filling out this past year as well! I don’t think you could find a more attractive wife anywhere else!”

“Hah! She’s so flat and *smooth* down there that even a grade schooler called her out on it! Attractive, give me a break! Big Sis doesn’t have any adult *attractiveness* at all, just killer instincts.”

“.....” Ryou and Machi are trembling, clinging to each other for dear life.

Their eyes are glued—not to me, but over my shoulder. W-Why?

That’s when.

“.....?!”

Zing ...! A chill ran up my spine as a cold air passed by my neck. It’s—killer instinct?!

Only then did it occur to me.

The reason why I came to this player’s room in the first place.

Who it was I was waiting for.

“.....”

I slowly turned around, stiff as a board.

“..... My bad. Sorry for being an unattractive, flat and smooth cold-blooded killer”

What I saw was silver

AUTHOR

SHIROW SHIRATORI

Although I'd been wanting to write about this for a while, writing Book 3 was much more difficult than I anticipated. I'm not sure if it turned out the way I wanted it to, but out of all the books thus far, this one is my favorite. I'd be overjoyed if you were able to take something away from it!

ILLUSTRATOR

SHIRABII

Reading Book 3's manuscript for the first time moved me to tears. It was my goal to help bring Shiratori-*sensei's* writing to life with the illustrations in this book.

The Ryuo's Work is Never Done!

VOLUME 3

Story by Shirow Shiratori

Art by Shirabii

Supervision by Saiyuki

RYUO NO OSHIGOTO! 3

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